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Worship-Worthiness and Absolute Perfection: Towards an Account of Supreme Worship-Worthiness

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ABSTRACT

Theists and non-theists alike have generally taken absolute perfection to be a necessary condition for worship-worthiness. Unless the object is absolutely perfect, it is often put, the kinds of attitudes or actions constitutive of worship are unwarranted. In this thesis, I offer an account of worship-worthiness that does not take for granted that to be worship-worthy is to be absolutely perfect. More specifically, I advance the claim that to be absolutely perfect is to be *supremely* worship-worthy and that supreme worship-worthiness holds a unique position in this respect. For instance, I argue that to be absolutely perfect and thus supremely worship-worthy is to be *necessarily* worship-worthy and uniquely worthy of an *undivided* worship. I arrive at this conclusion in a somewhat circuitous fashion in that the argument is premised on thin metaphysical and theological commitments so that the success of the argument is not contingent on commitments unlikely to be shared by my interlocutors.

Worship-Worthiness and Absolute Perfection: Towards an Account of Supreme
Worship-Worthiness

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

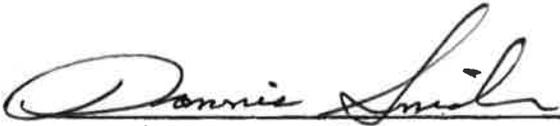
Theology

By Austin McCoy

December 2019

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Austin McCoy, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

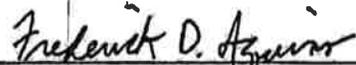
Master of Art in Theology


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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What is the relationship between the concept of worship-worthiness and an absolutely perfect being—that is, a being like God? Most basically, worship-worthiness as a concept involves the task of delivering an explanation of the fittingness of an act of worship. In virtue of what is a being worthy of worship? What is the basis in which an act of worship is rendered choiceworthy? Accordingly, worship-worthiness ostensibly would include facts about both the subject and the object of worship. Thinkers in the major monotheisms have conventionally taken the absolute perfection of God—that is, representatively, God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence—as the basis of God’s worship-worthiness. Absolute perfection, on this account, is a fact about God that delivers an explanation of the fittingness of all acts of worship directed to God. As the guiding question of this project indicates, I am interested in exploring the nature of this explanation of worship-worthiness.

Towards an Account of Worship-Worthiness

My interest in exploring the nature of this explanation of God’s worship-worthiness is, in part, because theists generally have gone further than to say absolute perfection is a sufficient condition of worship-worthiness and taken it as a *necessary* and sufficient condition. For instance, “perfection claims,” according to Brian Leftow, “have roots in primary religious life. They arguably flow out of Western monotheist attitudes of worship, for arguably to see God as anything less than absolutely perfect would make

Him out not to deserve the sorts of attitudes Western monotheist worship involves."¹

Absolute perfection of the object of worship, then, amounts to a strict requirement for worship-worthiness whatever else the concept might entail.

Yujin Nagasawa has problematized the view that absolute perfection is a necessary condition of worship-worthiness. In an essay titled “The Grounds of Worship” and a series of response essays, Nagasawa and Tim Bayne challenge the notion that God’s worship-worthiness can adequately be grounded in terms of what they coin the maximal excellence account.² The maximal excellence account construes God’s worship-worthiness much in the way I have described above—worship-worthiness supervenes on the supreme degree of the intrinsic excellence of the divine nature. The challenges posed are both direct and indirect. The challenges found in “The Grounds of Worship” are indirect, considering that the objections are directed specifically at what they term the “obligation thesis”—the thesis that persons are *obligated* to worship God. The reasons they provide, then, purportedly show why persons are not obligated to worship God on the bases traditionally given. This is relevant insofar as the objections to the obligation thesis would count against what might be reasons of the right sort to worship God or there are shared reasons to think one ought to worship God and that God’s worship-worthiness is related to the intrinsic value of God’s nature—though, the question of our obligation to worship God and God’s worship-worthiness are conceptually distinct.³

1. Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 11.

2. Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa, “The Grounds of Worship,” *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 299-313.

3. I shall not be addressing the question of whether persons are *obligated* to worship God, though it may be the case that if God’s worship-worthiness is related to his absolute perfection in the way typically thought by Anselmian theists, then our relationship to this perfect being might entail such an obligation. For what it is worth, St. Anselm himself thinks as much: “This is the kind of substance that is so pre-

Perhaps the most substantive and direct of Nagasawa's objections to the maximal excellence account are found in the context of his broader project first defended in the groundbreaking essay "A New Defense of Anselmian Theism" and developed further in his recent monograph, *Maximal God: A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism*.⁴ The Maximal God approach is a significantly altered approach to traditional perfect being theism, leaving open as a matter of principle the possibility that whatever the greatest metaphysically possible being is, it may not be what he terms "omni God." Omni God is the being that possesses the attributes of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence. The core of the perfect being thesis, he contends, is that God is the greatest possible being—and while the greatest possible being may in fact be omni God, it could also be the case that it is metaphysically impossible for a being to be omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent due to any number of considerations such as the classical formulation of the problem of evil or conflicts between these attributes. Should omni God be impossible to exemplify, we ought to conclude then, not that God does not exist—or that there is no perfect being—but that the perfect being is something that falls short (however short is indeterminate) of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence.

Considering objections to his new defense of perfect being theism, Nagasawa notes the possibility that the maximal God approach might entail that God is less worship-worthy or not worthy of worship at all: "Few perfect being theists would be

eminently valuable that people have to worship it." See "Monologion," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80.

4. Nagasawa, "A New Defence of Anselmian Theism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58, no. 233 (2008): 577-596; Nagasawa, *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

willing to accept the maximal God approach if it can entail that God is not worshipworthy.”⁵ Nagasawa offers the following response to the objection. Suppose that some X is omnibenevolent, omnipotent, but only nearly omniscient. Suppose X knows all true propositions excluding one: P . However insignificant P is, says Nagasawa, God’s worship-worthiness becomes contingent on his knowing or not knowing P . X moves from not worship-worthy to worship-worthy as he comes to know P , and this is absurd. Accordingly, for Nagasawa, it would not necessarily follow that if God is less than omnipotent, he is any less worthy of worship.

Even if the maximal excellence account is right, Nagasawa continues, he is unconvinced that “the maximal degree of intrinsic excellence” must refer to the omnibenevolent attributes rather than to the maximal consistent set of great-making properties.

Nagasawa’s approach to perfect being theism, then, poses a challenge to the notion that the basis of God’s worship-worthiness is his perfection (traditionally conceived) insofar as it in principle leaves open the possibility that there exists a worship-worthy being whose worship-worthiness consists in some combination of attributes short of absolute perfection. This nonstandard method in perfect being theology causes problems for any account of worship-worthiness that takes absolute perfection to be a necessary condition.

Nagasawa’s work, including objections such as the ones mentioned above, has catalyzed the attention given to worship as a subject of philosophical inquiry and in large part has inspired this project. While many have responded to Nagasawa’s new defense of perfect being theism more generally, few have responded directly to his work on worship.

5. Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 104.

This is due, in part, to the relatively little amount of attention that has been given to the nature of worship in analytic philosophy of religion and analytic theology.⁶

This is not to say that the concept of worship-worthiness has not received substantive attention independently of Nagasawa's prompting. Philosophers such as Robert Adams, William Wainwright, Mark Murphy, Brian Leftow, Paul Moser, Mark Wynn, Tom Morris, Richard Swinburne, Ninian Smart have reflected at varying lengths and with respect to varying purposes on the relationship between our concept of God and worship-worthiness.

More directly, Mark Murphy stands out from among these philosophers in that he offers one of the most recent and developed accounts of worship-worthiness. In *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*, Murphy responds to the potential concern that the account he defends of the normative elements of divine agency with respect to the problem of evil makes God out to be a being who is less than worship-worthy.⁷ He thus spells out in a preliminary fashion what worship-worthiness entails and why his account of God's own ethics does not undermine God's worship-worthiness.

According to Murphy, appropriate worship-worthiness relations presuppose and are partially constituted by having particular beliefs about and attitudes toward a potential object of worship. The appropriateness of such beliefs and attitudes finds its basis in what

6. There are a number of important exceptions. For instance, see Terrence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

7. Mark Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

would be reasons of the right sort to worship God. The content of such beliefs and attitudes ought to meet two conditions: “A being is worthy of worship by some person in this sense only when there is a massive inequality between that being and that person and the inequality is an inequality of a certain sort of value.”⁸ The value gap relation must be of an “inescapable and overriding” kind—one that bears practical priority over other kinds of value (instrumental, etc.). Similarly, the inequality condition is not one of mere degrees of value. Rather, the inequality, again, is of a certain kind, one in which the sorts of value are not even in competition with one another.

The preliminary account of worship-worthiness offered by Murphy and the work of these other philosophers provides a variety of resources for sustained reflection on the relationship between worship-worthiness and absolute perfection. Still, no one has of yet developed and defended an extended account of worship-worthiness and consciously factored in and reflected upon at length objections of the type levied by Nagasawa. Over the course of this project, I intend to develop such an account.

Towards this end, I will make constructive use of Murphy’s preliminary account of worship-worthiness in addition to the various contributions of other thinkers. To be more specific, I will be taking from Murphy’s work what I consider to be the key consideration for getting our minds around worship-worthiness—the notion of a massive inequality in value between the subject and object of worship. Throughout this project, I will be referring to this notion as the sufficient value inequality condition. Beyond this appropriation of Murphy’s account, I will proceed with an original account of worship-worthiness and attempt to accommodate objections along the lines of Nagasawa’s.

8. Murphy, *God’s Own Ethics*, 130.

Accordingly, I will not be proceeding on the assumption that absolute perfection is a necessary condition of worship-worthiness. Rather, I will argue for an account of worship-worthiness that admits of degrees. On the account I will defend, the minimum threshold of worship-worthiness—that is, the minimum distance between the subject and object requisite for appropriate worship—is satisfied when the sufficient value inequality condition is met. Once the minimum threshold is met, the worship-worthiness of a being increases proportionately with the value of that being to the upper limit of worship-worthiness, which I will be referring to as *supreme* worship-worthiness (this term is also Murphy’s). Absolute perfection, then, corresponds to supreme worship-worthiness. Supreme worship-worthiness is the highest position on the scale of worship-worthiness. Accordingly, the principal aim of this project is to advance a concept of *supreme* worship-worthiness. Along these lines, I will be defending what I take to be two key features of supreme worship-worthiness: 1) necessary worship-worthiness and 2) the principle of undivided worship.

Approach

The nature of this accommodation to Nagasawa’s objection is somewhat provisional or instrumental. *Ultima facie*, it may be the case absolute perfection is a necessary condition of worship-worthiness. It would not be the case, on this account, that worship-worthiness would admit of degrees or that the sufficient value inequality condition could be satisfied by any being other than an absolutely perfect being. Over the course of this project, however, I will forgo what I consider to be the necessary metaphysical and theological commitments to make the case for absolute perfection as a necessary condition of worship-worthiness. Rather, I will be proceeding on somewhat

metaphysically deflationary account, minimizing the metaphysical commitments required to get the argument off the ground as far as it is possible.

One way to think of this approach might be in the vein of a Wittgensteinian ladder. Rather than arguing for the absolute uniqueness of supreme worship-worthiness with thicker concepts of God or classical theistic metaphysical commitments (those of St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine, for instance), I will attempt to remain within the thinner metaphysical world of my interlocutors and of analytic philosophy in general, using its own procedures and resources and addressing their objections on their own terms. I will concede the multivalence of worship-worthiness for the sake of argument and then climb the ladder of multivalence (so to speak) up to supreme worship-worthiness, where I will then set the terms for what it may look like to toss the ladder. If this approach is successful, I will effectively have placed us in the ballpark of an account of supreme worship-worthiness. On this account, the supremely worship-worthy being is unique insofar as (1) the supremely worship-worthy being is necessarily worship-worthy and (2) to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being one must worship the supremely worship-worthy being alone.

Chapter Outline

Over the course of this chapter, I hope to have clearly stated the guiding question of this project and offered an explanation of what the question means. I have gestured at who some of the most relevant figures in the discussion are and how I hope to proceed in terms of my own account. In the second chapter I offer a defense and explanation of the sufficient value inequality condition. Along these lines, I also make a number of relevant qualifications, distinctions, and clarifications due to the relevantly underexplored nature

of worship-worthiness in the literature. In the third chapter I build on the account developed in the second chapter and offer a defense and explanation of what I take to be two key elements of an account of supreme worship-worthiness: necessary worship-worthiness and the principle of undivided worship. In the concluding chapter I will offer several reflections on the possible implications of this project as well as what difference thicker concepts of God might make for an account of worship-worthiness.

Contribution to Scholarship

The aims of this project are relatively modest. I will not be attempting to establish any strong obligation to worship the supremely worship-worthy being or requirement to not worship any other being. I will not be attempting to establish that there are no worship-worthy beings other than the supremely worship-worthy being. Rather, it is my hope to advance the conversation in analytic philosophy and analytic theology on the topic of worship and worship-worthiness. Contemporary uses of the concept of worship-worthiness have often taken for granted what the concept means and very few have offered independent accounts of the concept. Thus I take the account I will offer here as a novel contribution to the relatively new conversations surrounding worship-worthiness in that I will not be proceeding on the assumption that worship-worthiness requires absolute perfection.

Worship is one of the most central features of religion and perhaps the most central component of religion in the day-to-day lives of committed religious persons. If all that comes of this project is to bring more attention to the philosophical and theological relevance of a philosophically underdeveloped issue, I shall consider this a contribution, even if only a minimal one. Further, no one has of yet provided an account

of worship-worthiness of this length, and it is my hope that this project will provide helpful suggestions toward a constructive account and elicit further reflection on this central issue.

CHAPTER II
WORSHIP-WORTHINESS AND THE SUFFICIENT VALUE INEQUALITY
CONDITION

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an explanation and defense of the first half of the dual threshold account of worship-worthiness. The first threshold—the minimum threshold—is met when a being satisfies the sufficient value inequality condition and the second threshold—the maximum threshold—is met when (having already satisfied the minimum threshold) a being reaches absolute perfection. An absolutely perfect being is that being that exhibits the core great-making properties to the intrinsic maxima of their value. The sufficient value inequality condition is the key consideration for worship-worthiness. Loosely defined, the condition states that for a being to be worthy of worship, the potentially worship-worthy being must be absurdly more valuable than any would-be worshipper of that being. Thus over the course of this chapter I defend the sufficient value inequality condition as key to understanding worship-worthiness at the minimum threshold.

Getting our minds around worship-worthiness will require number of clarifications and distinctions so that when I offer my own account, we will have all the relevant concepts distilled down to the point that there are only as many pieces to fit together as there are pieces needed to form an image and where the image will be clear and accurate. Toward that end, in the first section I identify what I consider to be a problematic move among some perfect being theologians who take worship-worthiness to

be a useful criterion in perfect being theology. Identifying these problems will illuminate the distinction between worship-worthiness and the sufficient greatness criterion in perfect being theology. In the second section, I suggest that the most helpful way of characterizing what kind of task it is to develop an account of worship-worthiness is in terms of a “reasons of the right sort account” of normativity. Next, I offer something of a provisional account of worship so that we have just enough of a working concept to get us into the discussion of what it might mean to deserve worship. This leads into the next section, where I identify a few existing accounts of worship-worthiness and attempt to show the relative strengths and failures of each. Having identified the problems that arise in the existing accounts of worship-worthiness, in the next section I proceed with an account that avoids the issues I have identified along the way.

One possible way of advancing the claims of this project would be to appeal to thicker concepts of God or of the grounding of value than are commonly in circulation in analytic philosophy. As I mentioned in the introduction, I do not intend to proceed in this way. Rather, I will be advancing the claims of this thesis on somewhat metaphysically deflationary grounds, forgoing controversial metaphysical assumptions as far as it is possible when addressing relevant problems that arise. In proceeding this way, I can address the common objections to the claims I will be advancing on their own terms, so to speak, so as to increase the likelihood that my responses will be convincing to those who do not share my metaphysical commitments.

Worship-Worthiness and Perfect Being Theology

Developing an account of worship-worthiness is a distinct task from developing a concept of God and thus moves according to its own procedures. Attending to this

distinction is a helpful way to begin because it will give us a clearer view of the kinds of considerations that are and are not relevant to the development of an account of worship-worthiness. Whether the concept of God intrinsically entails the concept of worship-worthiness—analytically or otherwise—is an interesting question. However, for the purposes of this project, I will attempt to tease worship-worthiness apart from the concept of God for the sake of becoming clearer about what we mean when we use the concept and what the concept might entail apart from its association with the concept of God.

First, in many instances, the concept of worship-worthiness is employed in order to deliver for us certain results about the divine nature where the content of “worship-worthiness” is assumed. Unless specific content can be given to the concept of worship-worthiness independently of the commitments 1) to be God is to be worthy of worship and 2) to be worthy of worship is to be God, it is difficult to see the import of the concept in delivering specific attributes of God. Second, conflating worship-worthiness with the concept of God—more specifically, using worship-worthiness as some sort of sufficient greatness criterion in perfect being theology—fundamentally characterizes the nature of God in relation to creatures. This characterization is problematic for theism generally insofar as we are committed to standard ways of conceiving of God’s sovereignty.

For these reasons, I intend to treat the issue of developing an account of worship-worthiness as distinct (though not wholly unrelated) from the task of perfect being theology. Along these lines, I will not be using “worship-worthy being” and “God” interchangeably. While I am committed to the view that God is worship-worthy, for the purposes of this project, I will not be assuming that all would-be worship-worthy beings are God. In fact, God’s worship-worthiness will only substantively be the topic of

conversation in the next chapter—that is, worship-worthiness in the supreme case. Throughout this chapter, when “God” is used in conversation with worship-worthiness, it will be for one of two reasons: 1) the existing literature on worship-worthiness almost exclusively discusses the nature of the concept in the context of God’s worship-worthiness and 2) interacting with the ways people talk about God’s worship-worthiness is useful towards developing the more neutral account I defend in this chapter.

Consider an example from Katherine Roger’s *Perfect Being Theology*: “The starting assumption, shared by the vast majority of westerners past and present, whether theist or atheist, is that a being who is the source of all and a worthy object of worship must be the most perfect being possible.”¹ For Rogers, what would make a being “a worthy object of worship” would make it the most perfect being possible. In the order of operations of coming to know the divine nature, worship-worthiness is the more fundamental property than perfection and is doing more of the conceptual work. At the least, securing worship-worthiness is the motivating force behind securing perfection: “We must define God as best as possible, otherwise we are imagining a finite being woefully limited by our own imperfections and hence undeserving of our worship.”²

The intuitive appeal of this approach is clear. It may be that there is a certain kind of unreserved and whole-hearted worship typically thought of by the devout as appropriate to give only to a being than which we could not conceive of a greater. If there

1. Katherine Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), vii. In another place, Rogers says “maximal perfection seems to entail maximal praise worthiness. If God is not maximally praiseworthy, then we can conceive of a greater being, one who is maximally praiseworthy. See Rogers, “Anselm on Praising a Necessarily Perfect Being,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993): 41-52.

2. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 2.

are two impressive beings but one significantly more so than the other, perhaps we ought to direct our worship to the more impressive of the two. But if this is true and God is the limiting case of worship-worthiness, then God must also be the limiting case of greatness. Accordingly, we can take worship-worthiness as some sort of criterion in perfect being theology. God has those properties that would make him worthy of worship. As a direct example, Nelson Pike deduces a specific divine attribute in a case study following a similar procedure:

- (1) To worship x is to act as if one believes x to be conscious or aware.
- (2) If x is not conscious or aware, then to act toward x as if one believes x to be conscious or aware is to act in a way that is inappropriate and unfitting to x 's nature.
- (3) Therefore: If x is not conscious and aware, to worship x is to act toward x in a way that is inappropriate and unfitting to x 's nature.
- (4) If to worship x is to act in a way that is inappropriate and unfitting to x 's nature, then x is not an appropriate or fitting object of worship. (This premise follows from the fact that if x is an appropriate or fitting object of worship, then to worship x is to act toward x in a way that is appropriate and fitting to x 's nature.)
- (5) Therefore: If x is not conscious and aware, x is not an appropriate object of worship. ' x is worthy of worship' entails ' x is conscious and aware.'³

While worship-worthiness is already doing some heavy lifting here, Paul Moser goes further. For Moser, not only is worship-worthiness a suitable criterion in perfect being theology, it is in fact the only suitable criterion. Any argument about the existence of God that does not also establish the existence of a worship-worthy being is to fail to demonstrate anything about God: "Advocates of natural theology have the massive burden of establishing via an argument limited to natural sources of evidence that a

3. Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 152-153.

personal agent worthy of worship exists.”⁴ Inquiry into the divine nature, then, proceeds along these lines, yielding such results as, “Something will be worthy of worship only if it is morally without defect. Something (or, better, someone) will satisfy the title ‘God,’ then, only if that thing (or one) is morally perfect, and this perfection must be inherent rather than borrowed.”⁵ Moser is unconvinced that arguments terminating in the existence of some first cause or unmoved mover have any relevance for the existence or nature of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Accordingly, Moser argues we can get entailments from the nature of what it is to be worthy of worship to the nature of what it is to be God:

Part of God’s will, if God is worthy of worship, would include unselfish love for others, and direct acquaintance with such love would be *de re*.... If God is worthy of worship, and hence morally perfect self-sufficiently, then God is in a distinctive category relative to our familiar world.⁶

Satisfying a morally perfectionist title ‘God,’ a God worthy of worship would aim to be relationally curative in probing towards humans. From the standpoint of moral perfection and hence of worthiness of worship, God would be defective in lacking a relationally curative aim and practice toward humans.⁷

4. Paul Moser, *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconciled* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 123. See also Paul Moser, *The God Relationship: The Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

5. Paul Moser, *The Severity of God*, 12-13.

⁶ Paul Moser, *The God Relationship*, 11-12.

7. Paul Moser, *The God Relationship*, 43. Daniel Hill has in common with Moser this notion that the moral character of a being is the primary consideration for worship-worthiness. Among the various attributes that make up divine greatness, “moral praiseworthiness is one of the most valuable lot.” “moral praiseworthiness forms a central part of the worship-worthiness of a divine being.” See Daniel Hill, *Divinity and Maximal Greatness* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 215. See also, Charles Lewis, “Divine Goodness and Worship Worthiness,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983): 143-58.

In spite of its intuitional appeal, the conflation of the two tasks results in a host of issues. First, it is noteworthy that in cases such as Moser's, there is rarely any real estate dedicated to an actual exposition and defense of the concept of worship-worthiness. There are certain prereflective intuitions about what worship-worthiness might entail operating here, but for the most part the content of the concept—that is, what would make a being worthy of worship—is assumed. Unless it can be shown that being worthy of worship entails being “morally perfect self-sufficiently,” independently of the assumption that to be worship-worthy just is to be whatever God is and God must be morally perfect, it is not clear what import the concept has for developing a concept of God. There is a redundancy to the procedure without an independent account of what worship-worthiness entails. Without a filled-out and independent concept of worship-worthiness, the procedure has the potential just to yield the results the operator wishes the procedure to yield.⁸

Additional problems with the above approach arise when we begin to fill out the concept of worship-worthiness and become more specific about what we mean when we employ the concept. Principally, worship-worthiness is fundamentally a relational notion. Worship-worthiness is not an intrinsic property of any one being. Rather, worship-

8. Another more developed example might be Mark Wynn's *God and Goodness: A Natural Theological Perspective*, where he considers “how an examination of the nature of worship may furnish an understanding of the concept of God.” Critiquing Swinburne's concept of God, Wynn argues “if we are to find Swinburne's approach religiously adequate, we will want some reassurance that the God he portrays remains sufficiently different from human beings to ensure that he is worthy of worship, although they are not.” See *God and Goodness* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 142-46. Wynn offers something of a preliminary account of worship-worthiness saying that worship is “a fitting response to God, not only virtue of God's metaphysical ultimacy, but also in virtue of his or her inherent goodness,” “as the primordial expression of existence” and “the radiant attractiveness of God in himself or herself.” See 155-68. I think there is something to these preliminary remarks. But the “metaphysical ultimacy” of God is something that would require a great deal of unpacking; and in unpacking what metaphysical ultimacy entails, it is hard to imagine one could do this without making the metaphysical commitments I have decided to forgo.

worthiness is a property that supervenes on the relation of two parties. To be worship-worthy is to be worthy of *some agent's* worship. A being never appropriately worships himself.⁹ The import of this feature of worship-worthiness in the case of using the concept as a criterion in developing a concept of God is that God's own nature becomes *essentially* determined as God-in-relation-to some creature. God's fundamental nature becomes characterized in terms of something that is not God. As Mark Murphy points out, not only is it an "anathema for the Anselmian, but a mistake in terms of theism generally, to take God's fundamental nature to be defined relationally, especially when it seems possible that God might have never created."¹⁰ While the concern to guarantee God's worship-worthiness is certainly an admirable enterprise, it is not clear that the procedures above can be run without in one way or another obtaining its results at the cost of other general concerns of perfect being theism regarding sovereignty.

An advocate of the worship-worthiness criterion in perfect being theology may take issue with the characterization above. Perhaps there is a way to avoid a strong kind of *metaphysical* characterization of God's relation to creatures. That is, in employing worship-worthiness as a kind of sufficient greatness criterion, the criterion does not entail that God depends on creatures in any kind of way for God's existence or nature. Nothing

9. Ninian Smart, *The Concept of Worship* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1972), 26-27; James Rachels, "God and Human Attitudes," *Religious Studies* (1971): 331. There may be an initial concern here about the christological implications of the claim that no person appropriately worships himself. The man Jesus appears at times clearly to be worshipping the Father in the Gospels. This seems to me to be a problem of the standard christological kind where there is pressure to affirm apparently contradictory things about Christ's divine and human nature. Christ is passible in his human nature but impassible in his divine nature, for instance. I suspect that the standard ways to go about resolving these tensions could be applied to the issue of the second person of the Trinity worshipping God the Father as the God-man.

10. Mark Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 18.

is true about God's nature *in se* in virtue of some state of affairs other than God's nature. Maybe the heart of the procedure is *epistemic*—that is, perhaps worship-worthiness provides an epistemic way into the divine nature. Creatures can *come to know* certain things about God through the use of this criterion without saying that God is dependent in some way on creatures. This is not enough to get us out of trouble.

Getting more specific about the fundamentally relational feature of worship-worthiness raises a related problem. Take, for example, my suggestion that the key feature of a worship-worthiness relation is the value inequality condition. The conflation of the concept of worship-worthiness with the concept of God—that is, characterizing the nature of God in relation to creatures—runs the risk of limiting the excellence of God in our conceptualization to the kinds of creatures that exist in the world. If worship-worthiness serves as some kind of criterion of sufficient greatness for God, then God only needs to be as great as to meet the minimum threshold to be worthy of worship by existing creatures in the actual world. If there is any truth to the value inequality condition, then the value inequality condition means that the greatness of God becomes variable on the greatness of the creatures that exist. Had there existed creatures much more impressive than humans, using worship-worthiness as a criterion of sufficient greatness would raise the bar, so to speak, necessary for God to be great enough to be God. God would be a much more impressive being in this world than in a world where humans are the most impressive creatures. With this understanding of worship-worthiness, the minimum level of greatness requisite for worship-worthiness just is the level of God's greatness. Consequently, in our conceptualization, God ends up being a

less impressive being in this world than he would have to be if there existed more impressive creatures.¹¹

Consider a final reason against configuring worship-worthiness as some kind of sufficient greatness criterion in perfect being theology. If perfect being theology and developing an account of worship-worthiness share one and the same task—establishing the existence of God and/or some set of divine attributes—then those who would set themselves to the worship-worthiness task inherit the challenges commonly faced by perfect being theologians. It would be a reason in favor of any account of worship-worthiness, then, if from step one it separates itself from these issues before facing the kinds of problems that might arise that are unique to its own task.

Reasons for Action

How ought we then to characterize the task of developing an account of worship-worthiness? A useful way of circumscribing worship-worthiness is in terms of a judgment made by a worshipper concerning what the worshipper has good reason to do given certain beliefs and attitudes about a potential object of worship. Constitutive of worship-worthiness, then, is the worshipper's possessing reasons of the right sort to worship. "Reasons of the right sort" is a popular topic of conversation among those writing on the nature of normativity. I have no one explanation to offer of what exactly reasons of the right sort account of normativity means or all it might entail, but Mark

11. The objector might reply: It seems, then, that absolute perfection is the only non-arbitrary threshold high enough to guarantee God's worship-worthiness by all creatures other than God regardless of how impressive they are. This may well be the case. But *necessary* worship-worthiness is not what is under discussion at the moment. And this is only a problem for the distinction I am making if the only kind of worship-worthiness is necessary worship-worthiness. This too, *ultima facie*, may be the case. But as I have stated in the introduction, I have decided to forego the kinds of metaphysical and ontological commitments that would be required to make this case, say, if there existed an ontologically simple being, for example.

Murphy's illustration is helpful towards understanding the relevance of this concept in the case of worship-worthiness:

If a powerful person can credibly threaten me with all sorts of terrible evils if I do not worship him, that does give me reason to worship him: the reason to avoid these terrible evils. (Of course, I should not worship him. But that there are reasons to do so is obvious from the fact that there is some point to my worshipping him, that you would not find unmotivated and unintelligible.) But the presence of these reasons does not contribute to making this threatener worthy of worship.¹²

This suggests, as William Wainwright does, that normatively, “‘being a logically appropriate object of worship’ and ‘deserving worship’ are each built into the concept of worship.”¹³ Nelson Pike illustrates this distinction with an analogy:

If I were to propose marriage to the *Mona Lisa*, I would be acting inappropriately with respect to this object. The *Mona Lisa* is not (what might be called) a *logically* appropriate object of the emotions and appetites expressed by this action. The action would reveal that I had made a factual mistake about the features of the *Mona Lisa* or that I was suffering from a pathological condition akin to phobia. But now let's suppose that I propose marriage to Mrs. Jones who is happily married to Mr. Jones. Here my action would not be logically inappropriate, though it might be morally or socially improper.¹⁴

In Murphy's illustration, the threats of the powerful person make him a logically appropriate object of worship in some sense even if the threats fail to make him deserving of worship objectively speaking or in the mind of the one threatened.

Moreover, a reason to worship does not become a reason of the right sort simply in virtue of that reason's being characterized by the feature that the worshipper believes the object deserves worship. Devil worshippers take Satan to be both a logically

12. Mark Murphy, *Gods Own Ethics*, 129-31.

13. William Wainwright, “Two (or Maybe One and a Half) Cheers for Perfect Being Theism,” *Philo* 12, no. 2 (2009): 230. See also William Wainwright, “Assessing Ontological Arguments,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012): 19-39.

14. Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 156.

appropriate object of worship and deserving of worship. While Satan would qualify as a logically appropriate object of worship, it is hard to imagine any one account of worship-worthiness could accommodate both the kinds of reasons devil worshippers would take Satan to be worship-worthy *and* the kinds of reasons theists generally take God to be worship-worthy. The devil and God are such fundamentally different beings that reasons of the right sort to worship one would have to disqualify the reasons of the other as being of the right sort.¹⁵

Along these lines, the task of developing an account of worship-worthiness is to develop an account of reasons of the right sort to worship a being. What constitutes the choiceworthiness of an act of worship? What considerations count in favor of an act of worship? What makes an act of worship an act worth performing?¹⁶ Importantly, characterizing worship-worthiness in this way is to frame the issue in terms of *justifying* reasons for worship rather than *requiring* reasons. A justifying reason, loosely, is a reason in virtue of which an action becomes a reasonable or permissible thing to do. A requiring reason, loosely, is a reason in virtue of which not performing a given action is unreasonable or impermissible. The question of whether worshipping some being is permissible given the nature of the relationship between the worshipper and the would-be

15. This is not to say that the respective reasons would share no features in common. For example, both the devil worshipper and the worshipper of God might take one reason the object of their worship is worship-worthy to be that they are powerful. But the differences in reasons would far outweigh the features in common. If power were the only consideration for worship-worthiness, either both parties would have to grant that both God and the devil are worship-worthy or would have to argue that one's power is a different kind than the other. Given that neither party is likely to do the former, in following the latter the differentiation between the beings would reveal other mutually exclusive values (for example, theists might qualify the value of God's power in virtue of God's goodness, while the devil worshipper would not make the parallel move).

16. Mark Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 9.

worship-worthy being is distinct from the question of whether this relation, all things considered, might make not worshipping a being impermissible. The aim of this project is to lay out the conditions under which the former relation might obtain.

Worship, Allegiance, and Total Devotion

In order to have some semblance of what might count as reasons of the right sort to worship, some attention must be given to the question of what it means to worship. Towards that end, in the present section I will offer a somewhat thin or provisional view of worship. Accordingly, I identify the main features of worship and attempt not to commit myself to any one controversial or thick view about the nature of the concept. A thin concept of worship will be sufficient to get an account of worship-worthiness up and running. To identify these main features, it will be helpful to place worship aside other concepts often related to, associated with, or commonly thought to be entailed by the concept. This way, I can point out important similarities and differences between these concepts. Most basically, I take worship to be the appropriate response to a certain kind of value. This response includes communicating in one way or another, however directly or indirectly, the superiority of the object of worship and relative inferiority or nothingness of the worshipper. This puts expressive action at the heart of worship.

Still, worship is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down. Murphy sums up what we are talking about at the most basic level when we employ the concept: “Worship is a phenomenon involving beliefs, attitudes, and actions. To worship some being presupposes and is partially constituted by having a set of beliefs and attitudes towards that being. The actions that worship involves are actions that express, in more or less

direct ways, those beliefs and attitudes.”¹⁷ The difficulty in pinning down the concept comes in when we attempt to set a range of which beliefs, attitudes, and actions can properly be considered constitutive of worship.

Given the ambiguity of the concept, it is no surprise that worship can become a catch-all term for all kinds of diverse religious, aesthetic, or even ethical attitudes and behaviors. I take worship to be fundamentally a response to certain sort of value. But what is the range of appropriate responses to that value and what kind of value do we mean? Is worship an attitude consisting of a combination of attitudes often associated with worship (gratitude, love, reverence, fear, awe, respect, admiration) or is worship *sui generis*? For instance, Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa note that “canonical instances of worship appear to involve moral, affective, aesthetic, and numinal attitudes,”¹⁸ and in “many religious traditions worship is also taken to involve more straightforward emotional attitudes, such as love.”¹⁹

James Rachels argues that, given the kind of thing worship is, there cannot even in principle be a worship-worthy being: “in admitting that a being is worthy of worship we would be recognizing him as having an unqualified claim on our obedience.”²⁰ The unqualified nature of the demand on our obedience is problematic for Rachels because it requires a certain surrendering of our moral agency: “What we have, then, is a conflict between the role of worshipper, which by its very nature commits one to total

17. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 130.

18. Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa, “Grounds of Worship,” 301.

19. Bayne and Nagasawa, “Grounds of Worship,” 300.

20. Rachels, “God and Human Attitudes,” 334.

subservience to God, and the role of moral agent, which necessarily involves autonomous decision-making.”²¹ There is an overriding character of the obedience that follows from our recognition of a worship-worthy being that compromises the very heart of what it means to make moral decisions. At any point where our commitment to obedience comes into conflict with other moral obligations, the commitment that follows on any recognition of a worship-worthy being takes precedence over competing commitments.

Scott Aikin expresses the same sentiment:

- For any rational moral agent (A), if A worships *x*, A’s worship of *x* is the joint performance of three acts:
- a. A is unconditionally obedient to *x* and to the demands that *x*’s existence and properties place on A,
 - b. A views *x* as absolutely worthy of worship, and
 - c. A performs rituals or communicates acts expressing 3a and 3b.²²

For Aikin, any kind of expressive act of worship entails also that the whole of the worshipper’s life is owed to God. Aikin concedes that the concept of worship deserves further examination: “Does worship require obedience? If it requires obedience, does it require complete obedience? My answers have been affirmative, but I may be wrong. Worship may be purely expressive and nothing more.”²³

Rachels’ and Aikin’s construal of worship, wrong or right, at the least is not *ad hoc*. Their understanding of worship shares several features with accounts generally offered by theists. On the notion that worship entails obedience, here is Moser:

Characteristically, worship involves not only adoration and submission but also a welcoming commitment to the perfect goodness and authority of the recipient of worship. Worthiness of worship, as many people understand it, requires of a

21. Rachels, “God and Human Attitudes,” 335.

22. Scott Aikin, “The Problem of Worship,” *Think* 9, no. 25 (2010): 3.

23. Scott Aikin, “The Problem of Worship,” 11.

recipient of worship the worthiness of a person's commitment to, or trust in, the perfect goodness and authority of that recipient.²⁴

Worship, then, not uncommonly, is understood to entail this rather strict obligation to recognize the authority any being who is worthy of worship would have over the worshipper.

But is it the case that worship is necessarily an obedience-entailing concept? It may be possible that objections of the kinds levied by Rachels and Aikin and the description of worship by theists such as Moser place too great a conceptual burden on worship. This is relevant for our purposes insofar as the difference between an obedience-entailing and a nonobedience-entailing concept of worship seems to entail a weaker and a stronger concept of worship-worthiness. And it may be the case that a stronger concept of worship-worthiness would require additional criteria over the weaker one.

Perhaps Moser, Rachels, and Aikin have in mind more the notion of what Robert Adams calls total devotion. Total devotion is transparent as to its obedience-entailing quality: "Religious devotion is more than wholeheartedness or unconflicted enthusiasm. It is supposed to occupy a person's life so fully that nothing is left outside the realm in which it reigns."²⁵ The significance of this definition is that total devotion includes worship *alongside* other concepts such as obedience, wholeheartedness, trust, and love. Could it be the case that a being could be worthy of our worship but not our total devotion?

24. Moser, *The Severity of God*, 12.

25. Robert Adams, "The Problem of Total Devotion" in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 170.

Aquinas, for example, argues that worship is an act included within the broader virtue of religion, where the good of religion consists in rendering the honor due to God. Along with worship, however, are other acts Aquinas considers distinct from worship, even if belonging to the same grouping of actions under the good of religion:

Now there are many acts of religion, for instance to worship, to serve, to vow, to pray, to sacrifice and many such like.... By the one same act man both serves and worships God, for worship regards the excellence of God, to Whom reverence is due: while service regards the subjection of man who, by his condition, is under an obligation of showing reverence to God. To these two belong all acts ascribed to religion, because, by them all, man bears witness to the Divine excellence and to his own subjection to God, either by offering something to God, or by assuming something Divine.²⁶

It is the all-encompassing nature of concepts such as total devotion of Aquinas' notion of religion that create problems for theists who take total devotion to be the required disposition to take towards God because of its alleged conflict with our autonomy in moral decision making. But the problems presented are problems for *worship* only insofar as worship as a concept intrinsically entails a total devotion characteristic of more comprehensive concepts such as Aquinas' understanding of religion.²⁷

26. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 81, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Benzinger Brothers Inc., 1920), <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3081.htm>. It is difficult to say whether in Aquinas' treatise on religion he treats worship as an obedience-entailing concept. We see here that he at least treats them as acts performed with respect to different aspects; that is, worship is the proper response to God with respect to its end of valuing the divine *excellence* and service the proper response with respect to "his condition" as one subject to God. To bear witness to the Divine excellence can be teased apart—at least conceptually—from bearing witness to our subjection to God. To take Aquinas' view on religion and justice as a whole, I am not sure that we can get a view of out Aquinas that says it is possible for a being to be worthy of our worship but not of our obedience on those grounds, even if only because any worship-worthy being would also satisfy the necessary conditions of authority whatever they might be. For a thorough treatment of Aquinas' notion of worship, see Robert Staudt, *Religion as a Virtue: Thomas Aquinas on Worship Through Justice, Law, and Charity* (PhD diss., Ave Maria University, Ave Maria, FL, 2008).

27. While it is outside the scope of this project to take up this issue, I would not be willing to concede that the more wholistic concepts such as total devotion cause the problems Rachels and Aikin think it does.

Murphy argues, pace Moser, Aiken, and Rachels, that there is a relevant distinction between worship-worthiness and what he terms allegiance-worthiness. Consider what it means for some agent to have authority over another person. On one prevailing account, for some X to have authority over Y is for X's dictates to be related in some way to Y's reasons for action. One aspect of this relation is control. By control, Murphy means, in part, that X's dictates are constitutive of Y's reasons for action. X's command "actualizes a state of affairs that is itself part of the reason for action"²⁸ for Y—"The content of the dictate and what the dictate actualizes a reason to do must be identical; and the dictates must be themselves parts of the reasons for action actualized."²⁹ These reasons are decisive, meaning, "R is a decisive reason for A to ϕ just in case R is a reason that makes ϕ -ing *ultima facie* reasonable for A and not ϕ -ing *ultima facie* unreasonable for A.... In the absence of defeating conditions, the authoritative party's commands decisively determine what the other ought to do in that domain."³⁰

Thus for Murphy, to say that a being such as God has authority over creatures is for "God's commands that created rational beings ϕ constitutively actualize decisive reasons for created relational beings to ϕ ."³¹ But on Murphy's account, the attributes that make up absolute perfection are not sufficient for an absolutely perfect being's commands to constitutively actualize decisive reasons for rational creatures.

The Anselmian being's omnipotence entails that the Anselmian being stands in a *causal* relationship to creaturely agency, such that the Anselmian being can control the circumstances of creaturely agency at will, but it does not suggest that

28. Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 11.

29. Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 13.

30. Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 14.

31. Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 16.

the Anselmian being stands in a certain *normative* relationship to creatures, that is, that the Anselmian being's say-so always completes a reason for action of the relevant content. The Anselmian being's omniscience entails that the Anselmian being will be aware of the stock of creaturely reasons, but not that that being will be able to add to that stock by issuing directives. The Anselmian being's (alleged) perfect moral goodness may tell us something about what the stock of reasons is or how we may act on them, but, again, gives no basis for thinking that the Anselmian being can add to that stock of reasons by that being's say-so.³²

Neither is practical authority a perfection like omniscience or omnipotence are.

First, given that the existence of rational creatures is contingent, one cannot say that it is constitutive of this perfection that the Anselmian being is actually authoritative over anyone.... But, suppose we say that this perfection is just to be understood counterfactually: the perfection is being such that if there were any rational creatures, then the Anselmian being would be authoritative over them. This would still be problematic, for it would seem that any such counterfactually characterized feature of the Anselmian being would be grounded in categorical features of that being. But, as I have claimed, there are no good arguments from such categorical perfections to the Anselmian being's bearing authority over whatever rational creatures may exist.³³

Thus widespread as it is, it appears the notion that worship-worthiness is allegiance-worthiness-entailing is not without its own substantive difficulties

If it is possible to move forward with an account of worship-worthiness without having to commit myself either to the view that worship is an obedience-entailing concept or that worship is *not* an obedience-entailing concept, I will do so because of the complexity of the conversations surrounding the issue of authority generally and divine authority in particular (a question which in itself could occupy one's attention well beyond the scope of this project). On one hand, it seems that if worship is an obedience or total-devotion entailing concept, then worship-worthiness turns out to be a much

32. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 140. Murphy offers a chapter-length defense of these abbreviated arguments in *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 46-69.

33. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 140-41.

stronger concept than if it were not an obedience-entailing concept and thus the worship-worthiness judgment requires stronger grounding. Perhaps there is no rough-and-ready or functioning concept of worship sufficiently vague so as to please both groups.

Perhaps, on the other hand, there is some room to remain non-committal for the purposes of this project, given that the best defenses of both the stronger and the weaker notions of worship-worthiness appeal to the same grounding for their positions, only the stronger notion, so to speak, gets more mileage out of the one grounding. That is, both the obedience-entailing and the non-obedience-entailing concepts of worship take worship-worthiness to be grounded in the relative value of the worship-worthy being in comparison to non-worship-worthy beings (even if the weaker notion would require additional grounds for the authority-obedience relation to obtain).

Rather than place myself firmly on one side or the other, I will be proceeding on the assumption that I can remain non-committal with respect to the issue of the relationship between worship and total devotion. Perhaps we can place the differences between these accounts of worship in a stronger and a weaker notion of the obedience that the value differential condition can ground. In this case, in the instance of the upper-limit of worship-worthiness, the beliefs, attitudes, dispositions, and desires of one who truly recognizes the absolute greatness of the object of worship are strong enough that the range of kinds of actions that would adequately express these beliefs, attitudes, dispositions, and desires would amount to a submission of oneself to the governance of this supremely worship-worthy being. This would be the weaker notion of the obedience in that it is characterized by a condition. *If* one adequately responds to the value of the supremely worship-worthy being, then one will place oneself under the authority of this

being and would be doing something unreasonable or altogether incompatible with one's other beliefs and attitudes if one did not, given the strength of these beliefs and attitudes.³⁴ The stronger of the notions of obedience thought to be grounded in the value differential condition is to say that *necessarily* all rational beings stand in this relation to the supremely worship-worthy being, that is, normatively speaking, are under its authority regardless of what other reasons one may or may not have. The difference between the two accounts, then, is between a contingently obedience-entailing and a necessarily obedience-entailing concept of worship in the case of supreme worship-worthiness. Maybe this is a difference both sides would be content to solve another day as a second order issue in worship-worthiness.³⁵

From this point, we can ask certain questions about how direct the connection between our actions and the intention to worship needs to be for an action to properly be considered an act of worship. Many have noted the kinds of actions typically associated with worship in the most direct or ritual sense such as bending the knee, bowing, or offering sacrifices—actions that in one way or another directly (however symbolically) communicate the superiority of the worshipped.³⁶ Others note, as Richard Swinburne does, “Many different acts constitute worship according to their context—taking off

34. This is based on a similar formulation made by Murphy in a chapter on divine authority and divine perfection in *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 136-37.

35. I do not have sufficient time or space to allow the obedience-entailing or non-obedience-entailing quality of worship to be an additional variable in the mix. Nor do I want to hang the success of my project on taking the right side of a controversial debate about the nature of divine authority.

36. Peter Appleby, “On Religious Attitudes,” *Religious Studies* no. 6 (1970): 359; J. N. Findlay, “Can God’s Existence Be Disproved?” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955), 49; Smart, 26.

shoes, singing, dancing, saying certain things, etc.”³⁷ The context of the action has some bearing on the scope of the kinds of actions that might be considered an act of worship. One need not be in a church or synagogue to perform worshipful actions properly speaking. These actions are actions that in one way or another express, however directly or indirectly, the relevant beliefs and attitudes about the object of worship. The breadth of the scope of the kinds of actions that can properly be considered worship is, in my thinking, a live question. I will return to this issue and its relevance for developing an account of supreme worship-worthiness in the next chapter.

Existing Accounts of Worship-Worthiness

If it is the case, however, that “deserving worship” is built into the concept of worship, it may be that we cannot arrive at a tolerable concept of worship before diving into worship-worthiness. In this sense, maybe there is some extent to which one must learn to swim by jumping into the pool. Accordingly, in the next section I will explore what I take to be the more compelling of the available accounts of worship-worthiness. Interacting with these accounts will provide opportunities to reflect on what is helpful and what is not, what works and what does not. Identifying the problems that arise in the existing accounts of worship-worthiness will allow me to address them in turn as I provide my own account in the following section.

While there has been little attention given to the actual content of the concept of worship-worthiness in the literature, there has been a handful of noteworthy attempts. Each of the accounts I will address can be loosely categorized into three main kinds—

37. Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 293.

creation-based accounts, salvation-based accounts, and maximal excellence accounts.³⁸

Many such accounts present reasons as to why persons are *obligated* to worship God. I will set aside the issue of whether these reasons are sufficient to ground an obligation and treat them simply as reasons that may or may not qualify as reasons of the right sort to worship a being.

In *Faith and Reason*, Swinburne briefly offers reasons for worship representative of the creation-based accounts.³⁹

If there is a God and he has made and sustains the world and issued commands to men, men have moral obligations which they would not otherwise have. The grounds for this are as follows. Men ought to acknowledge other persons with whom they come into contact, not just ignore them—and this surely becomes a duty when those persons are our benefactors. We acknowledge people in various ways when we meet them, e.g. by shaking hands or smiling at them, and the way in which we acknowledge their presence reflects our recognition of the sort of individual they are and the kind of relation they have to us. Worship is the only response appropriate to God, the source of all being.⁴⁰

Swinburne here characterizes God's worship-worthiness as a kind of expression of respect and gratitude to a benefactor. We owe worship to God as the one on whom we depend for our existence. God's unique position as creator *ex nihilo* means that the kind

38 Bayne and Nagasawa list brute fact accounts and prudential-reasons accounts alongside these three but I am not aware of anyone who defends these accounts with any seriousness. The brute fact account, according to Bayne and Nagasawa, holds that worship-worthiness is simply a brute property of God, a property that cannot be explained in virtue of some other fact about God. Murphy's response to the notion that perhaps divine authority is a perfection could equally be applied in this case. The prudential-reasons account maintains that worshipping God might be in our best interest, either because failing to worship God would be punishable by damnation or, more charitably, because God has created us such that it would be useful to us to worship him. It is hard to see that groundless worship or any reason for worship characterized by self-interest could be a reason of the right sort. With Bayne and Nagasawa I dismiss these accounts as serious candidates for their lack of philosophical appeal and will not address them here, given their lack of representation in the literature. See "Grounds of Worship," 299-313. Elsewhere Nagasawa and Campbell Brown entertain the divine-command account of worship-worthiness and find it lacking. See "I Can't Make You Worship Me," *Ratio* 18 (2006): 139-43.

39. Though Swinburne's account as a whole might be considered a kind of hybrid between the creation and maximal excellence accounts.

40. Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 79.

of respect owed to God is of a peculiar kind, even if it shares certain features with the respect we owe to other benefactors. This unique sort of respect—worship—is the kind of respect to be given solely to our *ultimate* benefactor. Whatever respect we might owe to others on whom we depend, they depend equally on God for their existence.

Crowe offers reasons representative of what he calls a “redemption-based” account: “The basic thought is that, since God has performed acts of incalculable benefit for humanity, human beings are therefore obliged to render God His due as far as they are capable by worshipping Him.”⁴¹ Crowe lists the Christian belief in the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity and the atonement as acts that would ground an obligation to worship God. We are ultimately benefitted by these acts and worship is the only appropriate response as those indebted to a being who has rescued us from the misfortunes of the human condition.

The creation and salvation-based accounts are subject to considerable criticisms. Concerning creation-based accounts, it is difficult to determine what precisely it means to say we are benefited by our having been created. Aside from certain controversial metaphysical theses—say, Aquinas’ view that being is goodness—it is not clear what sense it makes to compare the pros and cons of existence to that of *nonexistence*. There was no subject to attribute benefits or disadvantages to before our being created.⁴² Granting, even, that it is sensible to say we are benefited by our having been created, it remains unclear whether the essence of worship is to respond to someone as to a

41. Benjamin Crowe, “Reasons for Worship: A Response to Bayne and Nagasawa,” *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 470.

42. This is a similar critique to that of Nagasawa and Bayne in “Grounds of Worship,” 305.

benefactor. This response seems more akin to attitudes such as gratitude or perhaps in the more dramatic cases, a kind of indebtedness. Unless worship is reducible to attitudes such as gratefulness, creation-based accounts fail to offer a sufficient explanation for worship-worthiness.

Salvation based accounts face the difficulty of explaining why worship would be an appropriate attitude to take towards a being prior to any saving act on our behalf. The fall of humankind is often characterized as a kind of failure to worship God rightly. If this is the case, then God's worship-worthiness is logically prior to his having saved us.⁴³ If there had never been a fallen human nature in need of saving, what then would be the basis of God's worship-worthiness? Additionally, like creation-based accounts, it seems that the kinds of attitudes appropriate in response to God's saving acts are more akin to love and gratitude. Unless love and gratitude adequately capture the essence of what it is to worship a being, salvation-based accounts fail in the same way creation-based accounts do.

An objector might reasonably ask whether an account of worship-worthiness that consciously excludes any salvation-based elements renders the seemingly counterintuitive result that the acts of salvation are not praiseworthy, strictly speaking. The intuitive appeal of this objection notwithstanding, granting a kind of worship-worthiness property to any of God's saving actions results in what I take to be far more counterintuitive results—results that those who would pose the objection would equally want to deny. Here is one way to think about it. Christian theists generally take as a

43. Bayne and Nagasawa, "Worship-Worthiness Again: A Reply to Crowe," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 479.

matter of revealed truth that God is maximally worship-worthy—that is, God is that being than which there could be no more worship-worthy. Either it is or is not the case that God is maximally worship-worthy just in virtue of our standing in a certain relation to him in terms of his own nature. If God’s actions are worship-worthy in any strong sense, this means that in acting to save us God becomes more worship-worthy than he would have been if he had not. We would be required to say that God is not maximally worship-worthy without acting to save us because there was, so to speak, still room to grow. But this is contrary to other commitments theists generally hold concerning God’s sovereignty and the creature-independent basis of God’s value. God does not increase in value in creating the world or in saving his creation because counterfactually, God would have to be less valuable if he had not, and this is unacceptable.⁴⁴ I will address the creature-independent basis of God’s worship-worthiness in more detail later in this chapter. Suffice for the moment to say that any account that would characterize the basis of God’s worship-worthiness in terms of a kind of instrumental or value-for-us account is suspect.

44. A similar case could be made against the creation-based accounts. In *The Divine Attributes*, Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz argue that “maximal greatness relates to an entity’s worthiness for worship and moral admiration” and that “God’s core attributes together entail that he is most worthy of worship and admiration.” They also argue, however, that “all other things being equal, an entity which intentionally creates good is greater than an entity which does not.” See Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 18-20. It cannot be both that God’s core attributes make him most worthy of worship *and* that in creating God becomes greater than he would be if he did not create (unless creation amounts to a core attribute that would entail some kind of pantheism).

However, in an attempt to do justice to the intuition that worshipping God because of the saving work in Christ or because he is our creator is a supremely fitting thing to do, perhaps we could characterize the worship-worthiness of these acts as reducible to or expressions of the essential divine attributes such as divine freedom, generosity, power, and knowledge. To worship God in virtue of his saving or creating acts, then, would be *really* to worship God because of these properties. Either way, I am content to characterize the kinds of fitting responses to God’s saving and creating work as gratitude, love, and obedience.

The most promising of the existing accounts of worship-worthiness is the maximal excellence account. The promise of the maximal excellence accounts lies in, among other things, its avoidance of the issues common to the relational-based accounts like the creation and salvation-based accounts above. Robert Adams characterizes the maximal excellence account as the recognition “not just of God’s benefits to us, but of [God’s] supreme degree of intrinsic excellence.”⁴⁵ The basic idea is that God possesses great-making properties such as knowledge, power, and goodness to the intrinsic maxima of their value and to worship just is to perform actions that express beliefs to the effect that God is supremely valuable. Worship-worthiness is a property that supervenes on the relation of our natures to God’s absolutely perfect nature. No value could be added to God’s nature by a relation to creatures.

The maximal excellence account is not without its own problems. Recall Nagasawa’s objection to this account from the introduction:

Suppose that X is nearly omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, but not quite. Assume that X is omnipotent and omnibenevolent but only nearly omniscient insofar as there is one true proposition that it does not know: p . If the maximal excellence account is correct and the phrase ‘maximal degree of intrinsic excellence’ presupposes omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, then whether or not X knows p , *however trivial that proposition is*, determines whether or not X is worthy of worship. As soon as X comes to know p , X suddenly becomes worthy of worship, which seems absurd.⁴⁶

Ed Wierenga addresses this objection head on:

I think this example is impossible and thus that it fails to establish an objection. It is impossible because it requires that there be a being S , a proposition p , and a world W , such that in W , p is true, S does not know p , and yet for every truth q other than p , S knows q . Thus, S would know propositions as, *Anyone who fails to*

45. Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14.

46. Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 104.

believe p is making a mistake, I don't believe p, I am making a mistake in failing to believe p, If only I would believe p then I would know all truths, I am capable of believing p, I have evidence in favor of p sufficient for knowledge, p seems clearly and evidently true to me, etc. This does not seem to me to be a possible situation. Another way of seeing this is to note that omniscience is not a property that anyone who is not omniscient can get close to having. In this respect, it is like the first infinite cardinal—there is no really large natural number that is close to it. I do not think that appealing to an impossibility can refute a philosophical thesis (unless it is a thesis about what is possible). An exception to a claim about how things must be is a *possible* way that they could be otherwise—not a way that *could not be* that is otherwise.⁴⁷

My concern with responses such as Wierenga's is that perhaps it amounts to more of a fixation on the particular example rather than the general point Nagasawa is making. Nagasawa's objection raises an important question about the maximal excellence account of worship-worthiness in particular but functions as an important question for worship-worthiness generally. It is a question already hinted at above: Is worship-worthiness a bivalent property? That is, is worship-worthiness all-or-nothing—either a worship-worthy being is absolutely perfect or not worship-worthy at all?

The heart of Nagasawa's objection seems to be that we can conceive of a being so impressive as to land just one tier down on the scale of greatness from absolute perfection and that this being may even be God. Suppose absolute perfection entails the co-instantiation of omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence. Suppose also that absolute perfection turns out to be impossible. If God is the greatest possible being, and the greatest possible being is a being who falls just short of absolute perfection, what reason is there to believe worship would be an inappropriate attitude to take towards this being? Nagasawa would say we have no more reason to believe that this being's inability

47. Ed Wierenga, "Augustinian Perfect Being Theology and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2001): 149.

to instantiate an impossible set of properties is a disparagement on the value of this being than it would be a disparagement on the value of God's power to say God cannot create logical impossibilities such as square triangles. In this scenario, God is still supremely valuable (in the sense that he actualizes the most possible value) even if he isn't absolutely perfect.

The sentiment behind the maximal excellence account includes claims such as Brian Leftow's: "arguably to see God as anything less than absolutely perfect would make Him out not to deserve the sorts of attitudes Western monotheist worship involves."⁴⁸ The justification for claims such as these usually goes something like this:

What deserves only qualified or limited praise thus does not deserve worship. And anything that can have a superior can deserve only qualified or limited praise. It is great—but there can be a greater, and so its praise ought to be qualified accordingly. 'O god, you are great—but there can be greater': this does not sound like worship.⁴⁹

Murphy entertains the same thought: "It may well be that complete worship cannot be given to a being conceived as less than perfect—how can one worship God as fully as possible while thinking 'but you could have been better' or 'there could have been a being greater than you?'"⁵⁰ The problem with this on Nagasawa's view is that in the scenario above there *could not have been* a greater. If absolute perfection is impossible, it would not be the case that there *could have been* a better and thus the "there could have been a better" line of reasoning fails as a justification for the maximal excellence account.

48. Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 11.

49. Leftow, *Ontological Argument*, 93-94.

50. Murphy *God's Own Ethics*, 3.

This is not to say the maximal excellence account ultimately fails. On the sufficient value inequality condition, it may be that the level of greatness necessary for worship-worthiness just is absolute perfection. But for any being who falls short of absolute perfection, the justified withholding of worship of this being would be in virtue of its failing to have satisfied the sufficient value inequality condition, not because “there could have been a better.” Accordingly, in a world where the maximal excellence account of worship-worthiness is true and an absolutely perfect being is not possibly instantiated, there simply would be no worship-worthy being. Even so, it remains unanswered why absolute perfection is the requisite amount of greatness necessary for worship-worthiness.

It may well be the case in the end that worship-worthiness requires absolute perfection. Perhaps there are other ways to get around objections of the type levied by Nagasawa than to concede the multivalence of worship-worthiness—that is, to admit that worship-worthiness is not an all-or-nothing property. I do not see how this could be done, however, without the appeal to rather controversial metaphysical theses and thicker concepts of God or certain kinds of defenses of perfect being theism than are often commonly in circulation. Rather than making such a move, I will attempt to accommodate objections to the maximal excellence account of worship-worthiness such as Nagasawa’s by proceeding with my own account of worship-worthiness on their terms—that is, on metaphysically deflationary grounds.

The Dual Threshold Account of Worship-Worthiness

The dual-threshold account of worship-worthiness I intend to defend shares most in common with the maximal excellence account in that it grounds worship-worthiness in the creature-independent value of any potential object of worship rather than the value-

for-us creation and salvation-based accounts. The maximal excellence account posits a single threshold for worship-worthiness—absolute perfection. However, in an attempt to accommodate objections of the type levied by Nagasawa, for the sake of argument, I will be positing a minimum threshold for worship-worthiness short of absolute perfection. This means I will be proceeding on the assumption that worship-worthiness does not require absolute perfection.

As noted above, I take worship to be fundamentally about the appropriate response to a certain kind of value. For the sake of this project, it will be useful to assume certain things about what kinds of attributes would make a being valuable. Atheists and theists alike generally agree about what those traits are. Along these lines, I will not be defending here that a great amount of power is a valuable attribute, contrary to what certain schools like process theism might say or that great knowledge is valuable in the way theists traditionally construe knowledge contrary to what open theists might say or pragmatists about knowledge for knowledge's sake. I shall take as axiomatic, then, that the value of traits such knowledge, power, and goodness can be thought of as existing on a kind of scale of value reaching to their intrinsic maxima—that is, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence represent the most valuable instance of each property and certain beings possess varying combinations of knowledge, power, and goodness to varying degrees.⁵¹

51. I am laying aside here, also, the complex issues surrounding the question of whether these properties are predicated univocally, analogically, or equivocally of worship-worthy and non worship-worthy beings, or whether a being exhibiting these traits to the maximal degree could really properly be considered an “instance” of anything.

Worship-worthiness is a property that supervenes on the relation of two parties massively unequal in value. Call this the sufficient value inequality condition. I take this to be the key consideration for worship-worthiness. This consideration is made up of two key components. First, as has been mentioned already, worship is never appropriately reflexive. If worship presupposes a kind of elevation of the object and the minimization of the subject, one can never appropriately worship oneself. Accordingly, this supervenience entails necessarily the relation between two parties. Second, worship-worthiness entails necessarily an essential superiority of one being over the other.⁵² This superiority, again, is about a certain kind of inevitable and all-consuming difference in value such that it reduces the worshipper “to comparative nothingness.”⁵³ The minimum threshold requisite for worship-worthiness, then, is met when the sufficient value inequality condition is satisfied.

This value is intrinsic to the object of worship rather than a kind of instrumental value, that is, a value-for-us. The inequality between a given being and any given worship-worthy being X must be so vast that for any X , it cannot be the case that value is added to X should X act in certain ways that are beneficial to creatures as insignificant as worshippers of X . This is because, counterfactually, if X had not acted in certain ways beneficial to worshippers of X , X would be less valuable than if X had acted in those ways. This would mean that creatures of relative insignificance or nothingness would

52. I am taking as a jumping off point Mark Murphy’s helpful section on worship-worthiness in *God’s Own Ethics*. Here, Murphy briefly reflects on these two components as “key to circumscribing appropriate worship-worthiness relations.” See 129-34.

53. Findlay, “Can God’s Existence be Disproved,” 51.

have a real bearing on the value of beings of absurd magnitude. But this is contrary to their value.⁵⁴

It is a basic feature of worship-worthiness, then, that the worship-worthiness of a being depends asymmetrically on the value of that being. This means that the value of a being is more explanatorily basic than whatever other features this being might have.⁵⁵

As I see it, there are two potential problems that arise from a formulation of a minimum threshold of worship-worthiness where this threshold is not absolute perfection. The first problem is that it seems Nagasawa's objection could be repurposed as an objection to the minimum threshold when the minimum threshold is an attempt to accommodate Nagasawa's objection in the first place.⁵⁶ Let's say that the minimum threshold requisite for worship-worthiness with respect to rational creatures has a determinate content made up of a specific configuration of knowledge, power, and goodness. Would it not still be the case that a given being would go from not worship-worthy to worship-worthy with one uptick in value where the relative difference in value between these beings appears to be too trivial to justify the evaluative difference?

Worship is elusive enough as a concept that it should come as no surprise that an account of worship-worthiness might run up against issues with borderline cases. We may not be able to know whether a man becomes bald at 400 rather than 500 hairs. But

54. This is a common attitude in the major monotheisms. That a being of such great value as a being like God would take any stock in the well-being of creatures is considered by the psalmist to be marvelous: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:3-4 NRSV).

55. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 3

56. I am grateful to Mark Murphy for pointing this out to me.

the vagueness problem for worship-worthiness is its *relative* borderline cases, meaning, “the question is clear but our means for answering it are incomplete.” *Absolute* borderline cases, on the other hand—cases where “there is incompleteness in the question itself” or an intrinsic uncertainty—are not the issue here as they are in the case of whether cutting off the head of a two-headed man counts as an instance of decapitating him.⁵⁷ No amount of conceptual analysis will answer this question for us without somewhat arbitrary stipulations about the definition of decapitation. This is not so with worship-worthiness. And as with other cases of vagueness in relative borderline cases, the problem is not with the predicate itself but in our thinking about the predicate.

Wierenga’s reply to Nagasawa may be of more use here than in its original context. Nagasawa’s “one trivial proposition” example appears to presume worship-worthiness moves at minute intervals. If this were the case, then worship-worthiness borderline cases would be as seemingly impossible to resolve as the case of baldness. If it were the case that baldness exclusively describes a subject when he reaches n number of hairs then it would have to be true that at $n + 1$ hair this subject is no longer bald. But the interval of a single hair seems far too small for this to be true. Worship-worthiness is a very different kind of predicate than baldness. It may be the case that there is no regular interval set on the scale of worship-worthiness. It may be the case that the intervals are regular but incredibly far apart. Accordingly, it is conceivable that the value interval at the minimum threshold is large enough to justify the evaluative difference between

57. Roy Sorensen, “Vagueness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018) ed. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/vagueness/>>.

worship-worthy and not worship-worthy.⁵⁸ By my lights, this is sufficient to show the relative plausibility of a hard threshold even if the vagueness as to where exactly the actual threshold lands is left unresolved or is unresolvable.

The usefulness of a minimum threshold short of absolute perfection, even if we must use “threshold” less strongly in the minimum case because of the vagueness of its borderline cases, is that it creates some distance between these borderline issues and instances of worship-worthiness closer to the maximum end of the spectrum than the minimum. It is important to keep in mind here the goals of this project as a whole. What I am after in the end is an explanation of worship-worthiness in the case of absolute perfection. The issue of vagueness at the minimum level of worship-worthiness is no more a problem for maximal worship-worthiness than borderline cases of baldness is a problem for the legitimacy of predicating baldness of a man with zero hairs on his head.

The second potential issue that arises with a defense of a minimum threshold of worship-worthiness short of absolute perfection is whether this introduces a flexibility into the concept itself that amounts to a kind of indeterminism. If the key consideration has to do with the value differential condition, then it appears that the minimum threshold requisite for worship-worthiness might be variable (conceptually) on the kinds of creatures that exist in the world. For example, is it a consequence of a defense of this sort that there is a possible world where humans turned out to be worship-worthy beings? If there existed beings sufficiently inferior to humans, it might be the case that these beings

58. This type of move would not work in the original context of Wierenga’s reply to Nagasawa because even if the interval just before absolute perfection were large, we would still be talking about a being of incredible greatness. But in the case of one downtick from the minimum threshold, we may be talking about a being sufficiently inferior as to fail to be worship-worthy.

could appropriately worship them. Additionally, if this follows, it would have the absurd consequence of the possibility of human beings being worship-worthy in a world where beings like God exist. In this case, both human beings *and* God are worship-worthy and the minimum threshold appears to be stretched so thin in terms of its actual content as to be meaningless.

This objection can be resolved relatively easily. Any worship-worthiness relation necessarily presupposes a subject capable of forming the relevant beliefs, attitudes, and desires constitutive of worship. But to be capable of forming these beliefs, attitudes, and desires this subject must possess at the least an intellect and a will. It is hard to envision, then, a being who both possesses an intellect and a will and is sufficiently inferior in value to human beings as to satisfy the value differential condition. This rules out inanimate objects, plants, non-rational animals, and a whole host of other kinds of objects. What this means is that whatever the range of possible minimum thresholds, each will fall within the same relatively narrow range of value insofar as 1) in all possible worlds creatures such as humans generally hold the lowest position of value while still having the capacities requisite for worship and 2) there is a ceiling on worship-worthiness in the case of absolute perfection—that is, worship-worthiness has an intrinsic maximum. So, it is not the case on my defense of the minimum threshold that there is a possible world where both human beings and God are worship-worthy.⁵⁹

59. The more difficult kinds of questions relevant to the flexibility of the minimum threshold are questions such as, “Could God create a creature so impressive as to fail to satisfy the value inequality condition—that is, are there possible beings so great that God would not be worthy of their worship?” These are questions that will be addressed later in the next chapter and in the conclusion.

The minimum threshold, then, is the minimum distance in value between the subject and the object of worship requisite for worship-worthiness. This distance is of an absurd magnitude such that the worshipper is reduced to comparative nothingness. I have argued that this—the sufficient value inequality condition—is the key consideration for getting our heads around worship-worthiness. Having argued for an account of worship-worthiness along these lines, we have set something of a base from which we can ascend to supreme worship-worthiness.

CHAPTER III

SUPREME WORSHIP-WORTHINESS

An important aim of the last chapter was to tease apart the concept of worship-worthiness from the concept of God to clarify what the concept might mean apart from its association with the concept of God. In doing so, I am not necessarily committing myself to the view that the concept of God and worship-worthiness are not mutually entailing. I argued that the sufficient value inequality condition is the key consideration for getting our heads around worship-worthiness. The minimum threshold of worship-worthiness is met when the sufficient value inequality condition is satisfied. Making the case for the minimum threshold of worship-worthiness required showing why it is problematic to take worship-worthiness as a sufficient value criterion for perfect being theology.

Now we are in a position to move on to the task of the current chapter: to explore what might make up the unique character of worship-worthiness in the supreme case—that is, in the case of a being like God. To that end, over the course of this chapter, I will identify and defend what I take to be two main features of an account of supreme worship-worthiness: 1) the supremely worship-worthy being cannot fail to satisfy the value inequality condition with respect to any being other than itself capable of forming the relevant beliefs, attitudes, and desires constitutive of worship and 2) the supremely worship-worthy being is worthy of an undivided worship.

I mentioned in the last chapter that I will be making certain assumptions about what traits are valuable for a being to have. There are standard and nonstandard ways of

conceiving of what traits are valuable and thus what traits an absolutely perfect being would possess. For my purposes, I shall default to the standard way of conceiving of absolute perfection. There are two things to note about the standard account of absolute perfection functioning in my account of supreme worship-worthiness. First, I am working with a relatively thin concept of absolute perfection so as to not kick any one off the team from the get-go. Some would say that rather controversial attributes such simplicity (or noncomposition) would be included in a being who is absolutely perfect.¹ For the moment, I will take absolute perfection to refer to a representative set of attributes as something of a common denominator: omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence. Second, absolute perfection in the standard sense entails an intrinsic maximum of value. To say there is an intrinsic maximum to the value a being might exhibit is simply to say it is not the case that the value of a being could increase indefinitely in the same way the set of natural numbers increases indefinitely.² However traits such as omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence may be construed in their more technical definitions, the intrinsic maxima of each means that it could not be the case that any one of these

1. I am also using the qualifier “absolute” in order to distinguish the working concept here from revisionist accounts of perfection such as Nagasawa’s, where “perfect being” may refer to a set of attributes that does not include the relevant omni attributes.

2. For instance, “what is essential in connection with divine might,” says George Schlesinger, “is not its infinite magnitude nor its being equal to any task whatever, but that it exists in the sufficient amount required for divine perfection. Thus if we should discover various tasks that seem to be beyond the scope of His power, that is not necessarily any consequence as long as it is evident that the ability to perform the tasks in question is not the kind of ability that enhances the greatness of the individual having it.” To put the intrinsic maximum of omnipotence formally, then “X is omnipotent if it is logically impossible to increase X’s power in consequence of which X might gain in excellence.” See George Schlesinger, “Divine Perfection” *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 147-58.

attributes be realized in a more valuable way. Conceptually, absolute perfection represents the upper limit of value.

Necessary Worship-Worthiness

This last feature of the standard account of perfection I am working with bears a relevant and parallel consequence for supreme worship-worthiness. If absolute perfection is the upper limit of value, and worship-worthiness is a property that increases proportionately with the value of a being to the intrinsic maximum of value, then worship-worthiness too has an intrinsic maximum. Call this supreme worship-worthiness. To be supremely worship-worthy means occupying the highest position on the scale of worship-worthiness.

There are two ways to think about supreme worship-worthiness and its normative status. Supreme worship-worthiness could be understood in a stronger normative sense or a weaker descriptive sense. The weaker sense simply identifies absolute perfection as the upper limit of worship-worthiness. It may be the case on the weaker notion that the supremely worship-worthy being, as absolutely perfect, would be worthy of the worship of any being such as humans but perhaps not the being who occupies the position of value one downtick from absolute perfection.

The normative sense is a much more expansive concept. For example, Mark Murphy's definition of supreme worship-worthiness highlights the expansive nature of the normative notion: "x has achieved this upper limit of worship-worthiness if necessarily, if y is an agent (or an agent capable of forming the beliefs, attitudes, etc. relevant to worship) and $x \neq y$, then x is worthy of y's worship."³ The expansive nature

3. Mark Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 130. There are a number of things that might follow from this more expansive definition about what kinds of properties a being would need to have in order to

of this way of putting it can be illustrated with a question such as this: Could there exist a being so impressive so as to fail to satisfy the value inequality condition with respect to the supremely worship-worthy being? Or consider again Nagasawa's objection to the maximal excellence account. On the value differential condition, could a being one downtick in value from absolute perfection appropriately worship the supremely worship-worthy being? On the stronger normative notion, it must be the case that any being who is not the supremely worship-worthy being, however impressive or absurdly valuable, could appropriately worship the supremely worship-worthy being and so satisfy the value inequality condition. Murphy's sense of supreme worship-worthiness, then, presses outward on the boundaries of value—or, as Murphy puts it in terms of the Anselmian being's perfection: "in characterizing the perfections of the Anselmian being, we should conceive them as 'pressing outward.' That is, there is rational pressure towards characterizing the Anselmian perfections in a substantively more expansive way."⁴ In an analogous way, there is rational pressure, on Murphy's conception of supreme worship-worthiness, towards characterizing the value of the supremely worship-worthy being as pressing outward against the upper limits of value so that for any being who is not the supremely worship-worthy being capable of worshipping, to worship the supremely worship-worthy being would be a fitting thing to do.

guarantee the requisite value gap between the supremely worship-worthy being and any other being such that the supremely worship-worthy being would necessarily be worthy of their worship. For the purposes of this project, I will be restricting my reflections to the two I have identified in the introduction until later in the project when I reflect on the relevance of thicker concepts of God and thicker metaphysical commitments for an account of worship-worthiness.

4. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 21.

It might be that the weaker and stronger senses of supreme worship-worthiness are not as far apart as I have indicated. Perhaps the first notion does have the expansive power of the stronger notion built into it, but we simply are missing a step. We need a reason to think that supreme worship-worthiness entails the *necessary* worship-worthiness of all other beings capable of forming the beliefs, desires, and attitudes constitutive of worship. It seems to me the guiding intuition for an account of supreme worship-worthiness is the notion that to be supremely worship-worthy means to be more worship-worthy than any other potentially worship-worthy being. “Supreme” is a greater-than relation. So, the supremely worship-worthy being, to be supreme, must possess the attributes that make it more worship-worthy than any other worship-worthy being. Thus the key consideration for an account of supreme worship-worthiness is to identify what traits would make a being more worthy of worship than another.

This brings us to the first main feature of supreme worship-worthiness: the supremely worship-worthy being cannot fail to satisfy the value inequality condition with respect to any being other than itself capable of forming the relevant beliefs, attitudes, and desires constitutive of worship. It seems apparent that to be worthy of *any* rational agent’s worship is to be more worship-worthy than to be worthy of the worship of only a limited range of worshippers. Here is one way to think about it. We can think of worship-worthiness admitting of varying degrees of stability or reliability. For any worship-worthy being just above the minimum threshold of worship-worthiness with respect to creatures such humans (or whatever rational creature occupies the lowest status while still possessing the requisite capacities for worship), we can imagine a host of changes to the world in which they exist where they would lose their worship-worthy status with respect

to some beings. Say a being just minimally qualifies as a worship-worthy being in a world where Superman will be born. Suppose also that before Superman's birth the only other rational agents in this world are humans and this minimally worship-worthy being.⁵ On Superman's birth, a being substantially more impressive than human beings has come to exist and this minimally worship-worthy being loses its universal worship-worthy status. As this example illustrates, beings who exist in the lowest register of worship-worthiness have a maximally fragile worship-worthiness status insofar as these beings are the most susceptible to losing that status with respect to the largest range of kinds of beings.⁶

To be supremely worship-worthy, on the other hand, is to have a maximally stable worship-worthiness status. This maximally stable worship-worthiness status is another way of putting the supremely worship-worthy being's necessary worship-worthiness of all rational agents capable of worshipping. For any being x who is not the supremely worship-worthy being, even the most valuable being second to the supremely worship-worthy being, the supremely worship-worthy being is worthy of x 's worship. There is no change to any possible world that could result in the supremely worship-worthy being losing its worship-worthiness status with respect to any beings with the requisite capacities for worship.⁷

5. I realize this example is doing a terrible injustice to the cosmology of the DC universe.

6. This line of thinking is an adaptation of Jonathan Kvanvig's articulation of God's necessary existence. See "Anselmian Adversities," *Religious Studies* (2018): 4.

7. One (not insignificant) matter that has not been addressed up to this point is whether there could be more than one perfect being and the possible problems this would create for any account of supreme worship-worthiness. If there are two absolutely perfect beings and "supreme" is a greater-than relation, it seems as though there would be no supremely worship-worthy being in a world with two absolutely perfect beings. I am not convinced that there is a possible world where more than one absolutely perfect being exists. Rather than dedicate space to rehearsing some of the standard ways of addressing this question in

The objector might say that this reintroduces the problem of flexibility in the concept of a minimum threshold verging on the kind of indeterminacy that was addressed in the last chapter. If the supremely worship-worthy being is necessarily worship-worthy, then this would mean that being would be worthy of the worship even of other worship-worthy beings. But for the supremely worship-worthy being to be worthy of the worship of other worship-worthy beings, that being must satisfy the sufficient value inequality condition with respect to these other worship-worthy beings. This would mean there is an absurd difference in value between any other worship-worthy being and the supremely worship-worthy being. The minimum threshold for worship-worthiness, then, would stretch the absurd range of value from minimally worship-worthy beings to the supremely worship-worthy being. So while the account I have been defending up to this point does not allow for the possibility that creatures like humans *and* beings like God are worship-worthy, does it leave open a wide enough range of value as to lose its determinate content?

There are two ways to think about the bearing on the range of value of existing beings in a world where a supremely worship-worthy being exists. One would be that the existence of beings who qualify as worship-worthy who are not the supremely worship-worthy being presses ever outward on the value of the supremely worship-worthy being. The direction of conceptual influence, then, flows from non-supremely worship-worthy worship-worthy beings towards the supremely worship-worthy being such that for any worship-worthy being, the supremely-worship worthy being is always sufficiently more

perfect being theology, I will simply take for granted as a standard account of absolute perfection that there can in principle only be one absolutely perfect being.

valuable so as to necessarily qualify as worthy even of their worship. The problem with thinking of the bearing on the value of existing beings in a world where there is a supremely worship-worthy being is that there is only so much space (so to speak) to move upwards in value. Worship-worthiness has an intrinsic maximum; thus it cannot be the case that the threshold of value requisite for supreme worship-worthiness can be pressed *ever* outward without qualification—the pressure outward can only go so far.

The second way to think of this relation is that the existence of a supremely worship-worthy being places a conceptual restraint on the range of the possible value of other rational creatures. The direction of conceptual influence then, flows from the supremely worship-worthy being downward such that the range of value of beings possessing the requisite capacities for worship are significantly lower than had a supremely worship-worthy being not existed. Putting things this way does not necessarily undermine the validity of the minimum threshold as a real concept; it only means that if it is possible for the supremely worship-worthy being to exist, it may be the case that there are no other beings who would qualify as worship-worthy. In a world where there is no supremely worship-worthy being, the minimum threshold is still a viable concept.⁸

Singleness of Object

This more expansive understanding of what it might mean to be the most worship-worthy being on the scale of worship-worthiness, in addition to delivering necessary worship-worthiness, brings us to the second principal feature of supreme

8. There could be a number of ways to go about guaranteeing the requisite value gap for necessary worship-worthiness. Perhaps it is in virtue of a being like the supremely worship-worthy being being the only being who is uncreated. Perhaps it is in virtue of a participation model of value where the supremely worship-worthy being is the only being whose value is not derived from something other than itself. Perhaps it is in virtue of the supremely worship-worthy being being the only noncomposite being.

worship-worthiness: the supremely worship-worthy being is worthy of an undivided worship. The question here, as in the case of necessary worship-worthiness, is to ask what properties would make a being worthier of worship than any other being. The guiding intuition for singleness of object is that it is more worship-worthy to be the sole worship-worthy being than to be a worship-worthy being among other worship-worthy beings. The supremely worship-worthy being, then, would be required to possess this feature. Call this the principle of undivided worship.

In this section, I will attempt to provide a somewhat modest explanation of the principle of undivided worship. As a general note, one initially tempting but ultimately inadvisable way to go about achieving the entailment from supreme worship-worthiness to singleness of object is to characterize this principle in terms of creaturely limitation. For example, one way to make good on the intuition that to be the only worship-worthy being is to be more worship-worthy than to be a worship-worthy being among other worship-worthy beings might be to appeal to the notion of competition. Beings of incredible value may stand in competition with one another in some sense insofar as a person is unable to worship more than one being at one time. But this fact of the limited nature of a person's intentional capacities says more about creaturely limitation than it does the value of other beings. The finite capacities of a creature would not nullify the incredible value and thus the worship-worthiness of another being.

Instead, a more promising way to go about getting the entailment would be to work within the concept of worship itself. The general idea is that, perhaps if we can get specific enough about what is happening when someone is worshipping, we can dial up a specific feature of worship to the supreme level and achieve singleness of object. This

approach suggests something of a direct relationship between the strength of the reasons for worship and the worshipfulness of the actions called for. The greater the reasons for worship, the stronger and more expansive the justifying force there is behind any given worshipful action. The range of worshipful actions justified in worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being is more inclusive than the range of worshipful actions justified in worshipping some minimally worship-worthy being. Here is a rough analogy. The kinds of acts performed with the intent to express love for another person should be proportionate to the strength of the reasons one has to love that person. That a person is related to us in a unique way would be such a reason. The kinds of actions one might perform to express love for one's child will be much more loving (thoughtful, sacrificial, selfless) than the kinds of actions one might perform in expressing love for the child of an acquaintance. Similarly, the stronger the reasons for worship or the more worship-worthy a being is (the more knowledgeable, powerful, good—the more valuable the being) the more worshipful (glorifying of the object, self-abasing) the actions justified in expressing the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions constitutive of worship.

The feature of worship that I will attempt to show can be used to get the entailment is *attention*. Effectively, turning the worship-attention dial up to the maximum looks like a *singular* and *unbroken* attention. By singular, I mean that the kind of attention constitutive of an act of worship directed towards the supremely worship-worthy being at any one time ought to crowd out other objects *as objects of worship*. By unbroken, I mean the supremely worship-worthy being would be worthy of the attention constitutive of an act of worship at every opportunity where worshipping is a reasonable

thing to do. These two components together, singular and continuous attention, are what amount to singleness of object. I will defend these two components in turn.

There is a further clarification to make before getting to the two main components of the principle of undivided worship. There are three possible ways that the principle of undivided praise might be understood.

Strong: If one adequately worships the supremely worship-worthy being, one will worship the supremely worship-worthy being exclusively.

Stronger: The existence of the supremely worship-worthy being amounts to a requiring reason not to worship other beings.

Strongest: The existence of a supremely worship-worthy being places a metaphysical constraint on the value of other creatures such that its existence excludes the possibility that other worship-worthy beings exist.

Because I have decided to restrict my reflections to justifying rather than requiring reasons for worship and to forgo what I think to be the relevant metaphysical and theological commitments that would be needed to make the strongest case, I will restrict my reflections to a defense of the strong formulation of the principle of undivided worship. Along these lines, by “adequately worships” I mean, loosely, if one adequately worships the supremely worship-worthy being, one will 1) worship in a way that meaningfully corresponds to what the supremely worship-worthy being’s greatness would merit for that being and 2) is in accord with their capacities.

Singular Attention

An early reflection on the nature of attention comes from William James:

Attention “is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence.”⁹ Since James, many others have

9. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (Boston: Henry Holt and Co., 1890), 403.

reflected on the nature of attention in psychology, neuro and behavioral science, phenomenology, and philosophy of mind. As a result, there are a number of ways attention has been conceptualized. Wayne Wu notes four in particular:

- Attention as a *filter* of information for further processing
- Attention as *binding* features for object representation and awareness
- Attention as *spotlight* (perhaps *zoom-lens*), highlighting its target
- Attention as *selecting* targets for memory consciousness, or action¹⁰

Wu himself defends an account of attention as “the subject’s selecting an item for the purpose of guiding action”¹¹ Sebastian Watzl argues for a structural account of attention where “the contents of conscious experience can be represented in a space defined by relations of relative salience. Attention to an item structures one’s conscious experience around that item.”¹² Each of these have in common the basic notion identified by James: “Attention is involved in the selective directedness of our mental lives.”¹³

I do not plan to devote space to analyzing the concept beyond this basic notion. For the purposes of this project, I will take this notion of the selectivity of attention as basic to any account of attention. With the exception of addressing issues relevant to an account of attention as they arise in my defense of the principle of undivided worship, the “selective directedness of our mental lives” will be sufficient as a working concept of attention to get the discussion off the ground.

10. Wayne Wu, *Attention* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 5.

11. Wu, *Attention*, 6.

12. Christopher Mole, Declan Smithies, and Wayne Wu, “Introduction,” in *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xv; Sebastian Watzl “Attention as Structuring of the Stream of Consciousness” in *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays*.

13. Christopher Mole, “Attention,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017) edited by Edward N. Zalta URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/attention/>>.

Accordingly, we can turn now to an explanation and defense of the first component of the principle of undivided worship: singular attention. There is disagreement in the literature on attention as to whether attention is something that can be divided—that is, if there is such a thing as partial attention or whether attention admits of degrees. The alternative is that attention is a kind of cognitive unison.¹⁴ On the notion of attention as cognitive unison, distraction would amount to something like the shifting of attention between multiple targets. I do not think that my defense of singular attention in the case of supreme worship-worthiness hangs on either one of these options.

Here is a defense of singular attention in the case of supreme worship-worthiness under the assumption that attention can be partial. There is something intuitively compelling about the idea of attention admitting of degrees. We commonly speak as though we give more attention to matters that are of more consequence or significance or value than matters of relative insignificance. It would sound somewhat odd to say that a brain surgeon devotes the same amount of attention to his drive to work as he does when performing brain surgery. A high profile spy may find herself out to dinner with an unsuspecting partner whom she devotes just enough attention to so as not to give away that the real reason she is there is to listen to the conversation of the two men sitting directly behind her where the majority of her attention is directed.

Accordingly, if we were to isolate a single act of worship at a particular moment in time, the attention directed to the object of worship would exist somewhere on the scale from minimal attention to maximal attention. But if the amount of attention that we

14. Wu, *Attention*, 99-103; Christopher Mole, *Attention Is Cognitive Unison: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

give to an object tends to reflect the value or relative significance of that object, then it makes sense to say that the degree of attention a worship-worthy being would be worthy of increases proportionately with that being's worship-worthiness.

Along these lines, the kind of selective directedness of our mental lives involved in an act of worship—carrying with it the cognitive and volitional content constitutive of worship¹⁵—can be more or less pure or unified. In the case of a minimally worship-worthy being, it would not necessarily be unfitting if our attention was split between this worship-worthy being and something else—even another worship-worthy being. It may even be inappropriate to give our absolute or unified attention to a minimally worship-worthy being. It would be inappropriate to give the amount of attention to a baseball game that the birth of one's child would merit and vice versa. The birth of one's child would be worthy of an absolute attention while a baseball game would not.

The supremely worship-worthy being, however, would be worthy of our singular attention in any one act of worship. The kind of attention constitutive of an act of worship directed towards the supremely worship-worthy being at any one time ought to crowd out other objects *as objects of worship*. I use emphasis here to indicate that I do not mean singular attention in the sense that any act of worship of the supremely worship-worthy being ought to crowd out any other object from the perceptual field or awareness of the subject. For example, in Christian worship, a person may kneel before the consecrated host with her attention directed singularly toward the host. But this does not mean that the worshipper does not also see the altar, hear the deacon, smell the incense, and have some

15. To direct our attention in worship to a worship-worthy being would be in some sense to call to mind the reasons for worship—whether beliefs or attitudes.

level of awareness of these objects. Rather, the attention at this particular moment in time is of a kind that eliminates all other objects as potential objects of worship.

But what if it is not possible, as some theorists of attention think, for attention to be divided? The notion of attention as cognitive unison is a form of the selection for action account of attention. Christopher Mole states it formally:

Let α be an agent, let τ be some task that the agent is performing, and call the set of cognitive resources that α can, with understanding, bring to bear in the service of τ , τ 's "background set."
 α 's performance of τ displays cognitive unison if and only if the resources in τ 's background set are not occupied with activity that does not serve τ .¹⁶

The basic idea is that to attend to something is to dedicate every relevant cognitive function to guiding some action; or at least, if a function is not involved in the guiding of a task, it is not involved in the aiding of some other task. Distraction, on this account, would be characterized as the shifting of attention between targets rather than attention being split between multiple targets.

Consequently, we need only to make a minor adjustment to the defense of singular attention offered above. On this account of attention, the singular attention merited by the supremely worship-worthy being would be for a cognitive unison to be sustained over the period of a single worship event. Rather than grounding this claim in the notion that we tend to devote more attention to matters of more significance (as "more" implies that attention can be partial), we can think of sustained attention over any period of time as something that requires more or less energy to sustain. The amount of energy we allocate to remaining undistracted during a movie is likely less than the amount we allocate to remaining undistracted during an important exam. Thus we can

16. Christopher Mole, *Attention is Cognitive Unison*, 64.

think of the energy we devote to sustaining our attention on any one target of worship as existing on a scale where minimally worship-worthy beings are worthy of less energy dedicated to sustaining attention during worship than the supremely worship-worthy being. The supremely worship-worthy being, then, would be worthy of a sustained attention minimally susceptible to being broken. This explicitly eliminates all other objects as potential objects of worship over any one episode. Perhaps it would be appropriate to shift our attention as we offer sacrifices to Jupiter and then to Juno in one cultic event, but this would not be the case for the supremely worship-worthy being.

Continuous Attention

Suppose the singular attention criterion succeeds; is this sufficient to deliver undivided worship? Even if the supremely worship-worthy being were worthy of an undivided attention over the course of any one worship event, the episodic nature of worship complicates the case for undivided worship. Generally, a person worships for a period and then is done worshipping. What might it mean, then, to say that the supremely worship-worthy being would be worthy of a singular attention unbroken *over time*—that is, over the lifetime of a worshiper?

One way to understand the element of continuous worship would be to expand the kinds of actions that could be considered acts of worship beyond the typical ones such that each one of our actions is a candidate for an act of worship. Thinking of it this way would characterize the supremely worship-worthy being as worthy of our every action being an act of worship in a more or less direct sense.

How might this be the case? Consider the possibilities of superimposition or supervenience. Ninian Smart reflects on the relevance of the concept of superimposition for any account of worship:

For even though sweeping a room may count as a form of worship, this is only seriously so when the person sweeping the room *intends* his action not merely as sweeping but also as worshipping. For him to intend this, he has to employ the concept of worshipping and more particularly of worshipping, say, *God* - and these concepts he basically learns elsewhere.¹⁷

Perhaps there is something about the nature of intention in action that introduces a helpful flexibility into the concept of worship. Insofar as it is possible for any one of our (nonsinful) actions to also be an act of worship, then *every one* of our actions is eligible as an act of worship. For the supremely worship-worthy being to be worthy of a continuous or unbroken worship-attention, then, would mean the supremely worship-worthy being would be worthy of our every action to be an act of worship in some direct or indirect way. A life lived in this way would amount to a singular act of worship or a succession of acts of worship one after the other.

It is not clear whether any of the available concepts of attention can deliver on any one of our actions being eligible as acts of worship. Attention is a relatively new topic of serious philosophical and scientific interest, and I do not wish to hang the success of this project on what would amount to a controversial position on what attention is. For instance, understanding continuous attention in the way above would require committing myself to some view of attention where attention can be partial. If the cognitive unison account of attention is true, the above defense must be false because it would not allow that attention to be directed to the supremely worship-worthy being if all other relevant

17. Smart, *The Concept of Worship*, 5.

cognitive faculties are not aiding the task of worship. Even an account of attention that permits degrees presents difficulties. It is difficult to imagine that someone whose concentration is devoted to a task as mentally taxing as defusing a live bomb or presenting an argument in court in defense of a man believed to be innocent could in any meaningful sense have some degree of attention reserved for the supremely worship-worthy being—much less whatever degree of attention would be requisite for worship. Arguably, in worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being, the supremely worship-worthy being ought to at least be the *primary* object of our attention even if not the sole object. So perhaps it is impossible to achieve undivided worship in the way above on phenomenological or practical grounds.

Thinking of worship in this way is not entirely foreign to the Christian tradition, however. Saint Augustine says in *The City of God* that “The true sacrifice, then, is every act done in order that we might cling to God in holy fellowship, that is, every act which is referred to the final good in which we can be truly blessed.”¹⁸ “But sacrifice,” says Aquinas commenting on Augustine, “belongs to religion.... Every virtuous deed is said to be a sacrifice, insofar as it is done out of reverence of God” and “Every deed, insofar as it is done in God’s honor, belongs to religion.”¹⁹ Thus the question is, as in the case of whether worship is an obedience-entailing concept—in what consists the phrases “done out of reverence of God” or “done in God’s honor.” A defense of the principle of undivided worship along the lines of the one above might be salvageable on systematic

18. Augustine, *The City of God*, vol. 1 trans. William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2012), 310.

19. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 81, a. 4.

theological grounds. To achieve the principle of undivided worship on the grounds above, our concept of worship would need to include some fundamental dispositional element such that worship would include any act involved in the general ordering of one's life to the supremely worship-worthy being. Saint Paul seems to be getting at something along these lines: "I appeal to you therefore, brother and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."²⁰ Paul seems to think that the whole of one's life can be lived in such a way as to be an act of worship. Perhaps this dispositional element could ground the notion that any one of our acts are candidates for acts of worship insofar as they are "done out of reverence of God," even if the supremely worship-worthy being is not the primary object of our attention in some mentally taxing act. It is not within the scope of this project to tease out how this might be the case philosophically. As far as the parameters of this project are concerned, I consider this problem to be in the same boat as the obedience-entailing or nonobedience-entailing problem in the concept of worship. It is a second order issue in worship-worthiness.²¹

Consider another way of understanding the continuous element of undivided worship. Continuous attention could also refer to performing an act of worship at any moment where worshiping is a possible or reasonable thing to do. "Continuous" or "unbroken" in this sense is continuous in the way perfect attendance or an on-base percentage can be continuous or unbroken. Perfect school attendance does not mean that a student never leaves the school. Neither does 1000% on base percentage mean that a

20. Rom. 12:1.

21. There will be occasion to reflect on this issue in the conclusion.

player never steps foot off the bag. Rather, the continuous or unbroken character of perfect attendance or a 1000% on-base percentage refers to the reality that in every instance where there is an opportunity to attend school or to reach base, a student or player succeeds in attending school or reaching base.

In the case of an example more proximate to worship, a man may love his spouse maximally insofar as he expresses his love for his spouse at every opportunity (“every opportunity” reasonably construed) to express his love. It would not be the case that every one of his actions could count as an expression of love for his spouse, but this does not count against his love any more than a baseball player’s going out to dinner would count against his OBP or a student’s not attending school during summer break counts against her perfect attendance. Importantly, “at every opportunity” includes a vast range of kinds of actions at varying degrees of sacrifice. Expressing his love at every opportunity may mean cooking dinner when his spouse is tired. It would include resisting the temptation to perform some act that would count against his love such as romantically engaging some person other than his spouse. Adequately expressing his maximal love may also mean laying down his life when his spouse’s life is threatened.

Similarly, undivided worship would include a singular attention over any one act of worship *and* an unbroken attention where “unbroken” refers to a singular attention at every opportunity (reasonably construed) to worship. The qualifier “reasonably construed” merits comment. I take “reasonably construed” to mean that “every opportunity” to worship is qualified by what other legitimate reasons one has not to worship in any given moment. Along these lines, what would count as an adequate expression of worship of the supremely worship-worthy being would vary from person to

person. A single mother of five working multiple jobs to put food on the table is not failing to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being if the only opportunity she has to worship where worshipping would not occur at the expense of fulfilling her obligations to her children is once a week on Sunday mornings.²² If a person is seriously ill or impaired in such a way that there are significantly fewer opportunities for that person to worship than one who is well, they are not failing to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being if the disparity between the number of opportunities to worship for one who is well and one who is not can be accounted for by the impairment. A defense of the sort I have offered above is flexible enough to cover the case of the single mother as well as the monk who has dedicated his life to prayer and worship. “Every opportunity” for the cloistered monk would amount to significantly more opportunities than for the single mother.

As in the case of the man who wishes to adequately express his maximal love for his spouse where doing so includes expressing his love at every opportunity to express his love, there are a multitude of kinds of expressions at varying levels of sacrifice that may take place in worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being at every opportunity to worship. Suppose one has an additional fifteen minutes at the start of the day before leaving the house for work than originally planned. Instead of spending these fifteen minutes scrolling through social media, this person takes this time as an opportunity to worship the supremely worship-worthy being in some way. Giving up fifteen minutes of

22. It is worth noting here again that, on systematic theological grounds, it may even be the case that this mother’s actions in caring for her children are acts of worship. The difficulty is in determining how one can refer to God (as an act of worship must) in acting in certain ways towards persons. The Gospel of Matthew points us in a possible direction: “And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (25:40).

social media time does not amount to all that much of a sacrifice or reflect a great intensity of expression.²³ One could imagine more costly examples.

More to the point of this section, to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being would include organizing one's life in a way where there are maximal opportunities to worship (reasonably construed) *and* a requirement not to worship another being. Any opportunity to worship a being is an opportunity to worship the supremely worship-worthy being. But for any opportunity to worship the supremely worship-worthy being, the supremely worship-worthy being is worthy of worship at that particular moment. So to worship another being would be to fail to worship the supremely worship-worthy being at an opportunity to worship the supremely worship-worthy being. Insofar as the supremely worship-worthy being is worthy of worship at every opportunity to worship, worshipping another being would count as a mark against adequately worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being.

It is important to keep in mind the contingency of the strong formulation of the principle of undivided worship. When I say that adequately worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being would include a requirement not to worship another being, what I am not saying is that this amounts to an all-things-considered type of obligation. It is only a requirement in the sense of its entailment in the notion of adequately worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being. To establish an all-things-considered sort of obligation not to worship another being, one would need to show why there might be an all-things-

23. I am not suggesting here that to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being one must spend every moment of free time worshipping. The reasonable construal of "every opportunity" would account for the importance of leisure, rest, socializing, and vocation. As with most things of importance, the appropriate balance requires wisdom and discernment.

considered sort of obligation to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being. I have restricted my defense and explanation to the strong formulation and thus consciously avoided the language of obligation or requiring reasons.

Conclusion

There are a great number of things that could be said to be unique about worship-worthiness in the supreme case. For instance, adequately worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being might include a requirement against a range of kinds of actions or attitudes that would count against adequate worship. Insofar as one is prideful, one is failing in some moment to acknowledge the importance or value of one's own life relative to the supremely worship-worthy being. Adequately worshipping the supremely worship-worthy being, then, might entail a requirement against pridefulness.

The purpose of this chapter, however, was to provide an explanation and defense of what I take to be two principal features of supreme worship-worthiness: necessary worship-worthiness and the principle of undivided worship. The guiding intuition in discerning these two features is the notion that to be supremely worship-worthy is to be that being than which there is not a more worship-worthy on the scale of worship-worthiness. The supremely worship-worthy being would have those properties requisite to satisfy this description. First, to be worthy of worship of any rational being with the necessary capacities is to be more worship-worthy than to be worthy of only some portion of those beings. Accordingly, to be necessarily worship-worthy is a key feature of supreme worship-worthiness. The intuition behind the principle of undivided worship is that to be the sole worship-worthy being is to be more worship-worthy than to be a worship-worthy being among other worship-worthy beings. To cash out this intuition, I

proceeded in a somewhat circuitous fashion. I isolated the concept of attention as a key feature of the concept of worship, showing that the supremely worship-worthy being would be worthy of singular and a continuous worship-attention where “singular” and “continuous” deliver on the notion of the supremely worship-worthy being as worthy of an undivided worship.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The principal aim of this thesis has been to explore the relationship between worship-worthiness and absolute perfection. I have argued that absolute perfection occupies a unique position within the concept of worship-worthiness. To be absolutely perfect is to be supremely worship-worthy. To attain supreme worship-worthiness is to pass a threshold that makes it qualitatively different from any other instance of worship-worthiness both in that to be supremely worship-worthy is to be necessarily worthy of worship and to be the one being to qualify for undivided worship.

To accomplish this, in the second chapter I argued for what I consider the key consideration for worship-worthiness: to be worthy of worship by some agent is to have satisfied the sufficient value inequality condition. This criterion states that to be worthy of worship is to be absurdly greater in value than a would-be worshipper. Along these lines, I attempted to tease apart the concept of worship-worthiness from the concept of God in order to become clearer about what the concept means independently of its association with God. Teasing apart worship-worthiness from the concept of God yielded a multivalent concept of worship-worthiness—that is, I argued for a notion of worship-worthiness that is not an all-or-nothing property. On this account, it is possible to be worthy of worship without being absolutely perfect.

In the third chapter I used the multivalence of worship-worthiness to reach supreme worship-worthiness and show what is unique about this particular instance. I

argued that supreme worship-worthiness entails a maximally stable worship-worthiness status and thus necessary worship-worthiness. There is no possible world where the supremely worship-worthy being is not worship-worthy of any rational agent with the requisite capacities for worship. I also argued that to be supremely worship-worthy is to be uniquely worship-worthy insofar as the supremely worship-worthy being is worthy of an undivided worship. In particular, I advanced the strong version of the principle of undivided worship where this principle means that to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being is to worship the supremely worship-worthy being singularly and continuously.

There are a number of ways this project might naturally be continued into further reflection. I have already mentioned the importance of the obedience-entailing or nonobedience-entailing issue in the concept of worship as a second order issue in worship-worthiness. Along these lines, there is much work to be done on the relationship between worship-worthiness and divine authority. Mark Murphy has helpfully laid out the relevant considerations in a chapter titled “Worship-Worthiness and Allegiance-Worthiness” in *God’s Own Ethics*.¹ His work here and in his monograph on divine authority merit further engagement on this front. Adjacent areas of interest might be to pursue the relationship between worship and neighboring concepts such as devotion, gratitude, and love.

Another potentially fruitful area to pursue with respect to the work done in this project would be to explore what relevance the concept of worship-worthiness does, in fact, have for the concept of God and vice versa. I have consciously attempted to treat the

1. Murphy, *God’s Own Ethics*, 129-46.

issue of developing an account of worship-worthiness as separate from method in perfect being theology. At the least, we ought to have a functioning concept of worship-worthiness formed independently from operative assumptions about what God must be like. Otherwise, it is difficult to see in what way it is useful in this respect. I have noted the ways that I find inadvisable when it comes to using worship-worthiness to yield results for the concept of God. But I think it would go too far to say that the concept of worship-worthiness has zero bearing on how we go about thinking about our concept of God.

For instance, I have noted that Nagasawa's monograph, *Maximal God: A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism*, was a primary inspiration for this thesis. The core of the perfect being thesis, according to Nagasawa, is that God is the greatest possible being. And while "greatest possible being" may refer to the being who instantiates the set of omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence, it may be the case that these properties cannot possibly be co-instantiated because of any number of classical problems in perfect being theology (the problem of evil, incoherence of an attribute). If this turned out to be the case, we should simply revise our concept of God to accommodate the issue. Should we find the problem of evil insurmountable, for example, perhaps we should conclude—rather than that God does not exist—that "the greatest possible being" would not include omnipotence. The greatest possible being, then, would not be the absolutely perfect being.

There is a level of indeterminacy to this concept of God insofar as it is indefinitely revisable. Should we encounter a roadblock that appears we cannot find our way around, we should drop God's greatness a tier rather than give up on the enterprise

of perfect being theology. But this seems to leave open the content of the divine identity. God might be omnipotent, for example. But on Nagasawa's account, God could fall far short of omnipotence.

Because the identity of the object of worship is the key consideration constitutive of the worship-worthiness judgment, this indeterminacy creates a number of substantial problems.² This implicit agnosticism about what God is actually like creates issues both for successful reference and introduces an instability to the worship-worthiness judgment. If our concept of God is indefinitely revisable, so too is the basis of our worship-worthiness judgments. The content of the divine identity ought to be stable enough for us such that we do not run the risk of having committed idolatry or performed unfitting worship acts in revising our understanding of God's identity from one set of properties to another. There is no mechanism in place to ensure we do not moderate our concept of God too soon. How, under Nagasawa's method, are we to know when to press further in our investigation to resolve a given issue and when to moderate? In the former case, we would have found the solution and continued to direct our worship to the actual God.

Second, Nagasawa notes the concern traditional perfect being theists might have with his account in that it is possible for maximal God to turn out less worship-worthy than omni God or, on the maximal excellence account, not worship-worthy at all: "Few perfect being theists would be willing to accept the maximal God approach if it can entail

2. For instance, Peter Geach argues about love of God: "But cannot love unite a man to God despite any amount of intellectual error? I do not think so... A man's love for a woman, however much it means to him, scarcely latches on to her if his acquaintance with her is extremely slight, if she is for him a *princesse lointaine*, if he has fantastic misconceptions of her actual characteristics." See Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1969), 111.

that God is not worshipworthy.”³ I have shown that Nagasawa’s response to this (the one trivial proposition objection) is not all that problematic on the account of worship-worthiness defended in this thesis. We can concede the multivalence of worship-worthiness and potentially still make trouble for Nagasawa’s defense of perfect being theism with the worship-worthiness problem insofar as to be absolutely perfect is to be exceedingly more worship-worthy than any other worship-worthy being.

Would this mean, however, that worship-worthiness can in fact be used as a criterion in perfect being theology? Jeff Speaks suggests as much. For Speaks, “the claim that God is the greatest possible being does not capture the core of our conception of God. At best, it can capture the core of our conception of God only if it is combined with certain theses about modal space.”⁴ As Nagasawa’s approach illustrates, “the greatest possible being” does not guarantee that God is sufficiently great to be God unless it is partnered with certain assumptions about what it is possible to be.

One way to show that this is a mistake is to imagine that, at the end of the universe, it turns out that Michael Jordan was the most impressive being to have ever existed. Then atheism is true, because, as it turns out, the universe did not turn out to include any being great enough to be God. Being the best would not make Jordan God; so the claim that God is the greatest actual being does not capture the core of our conception of God.⁵

Convinced that the perfect being thesis and the existence proofs of natural theology ultimately fail to deliver divine attributes, Speaks suggests a number of possible ways forward:

3. Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 105

4. Jeff Speaks, *The Greatest Possible Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 121.

5. Jeff Speaks, *The Greatest Possible Being*, 122-23.

It is then hard to see how we can get started theorizing about the attributes of God without bringing to bear substantial assumptions about God which are themselves neither conceptual truths nor knowable by reason alone. It seems inevitable then that our reasoning about the attributes of God will be somewhat parochial, in the sense that it will be guided by theses about God which not all believers in God will be willing to endorse....

For instance, one might take as one's foundational attribute the property of being capable of offering human beings genuine salvation; or the property of being a suitable object of faith; or the property of being deserving of worship. (Though we should not pretend that the claims that God has these properties are conceptual truths.) Of course, properties like these do already play a role in theorizing about the attributes in contemporary philosophy of religion. But a philosophical theology which put properties like these, rather than the property of being the greatest possible being, at the center would look quite a bit different.⁶

It seems to me then, that, if Speaks is right about the insufficiency of the perfect being thesis in its classical formulations to deliver a guarantee of sufficient greatness (and I do not know that he is), it is an open question as to the usefulness of the concept of worship-worthiness as a criterion in philosophical theology. In developing the account of worship-worthiness, I have conceded the possibility that there is no worship-worthiness that is not necessary worship-worthiness and thus no worship-worthy being who is not absolutely perfect. If this account of worship-worthiness could be formed independently of operative assumptions about what God must be like, perhaps there is a usefulness as a criterion so long as God's own nature is not characterized relationally in a metaphysical sense. Importantly, it appears to me also, as Speaks suggests, that the extent to which we can investigate worship and worship-worthiness with philosophical rigor is an open question. Independent of other confessional commitments, it may be that we max out philosophical

6. Jeff Speaks, *The Greatest Possible Being*, 156-57. Jerome Gellman suggests a similar procedure—a procedure that will deliver a “religiously adequate” conception of God. For Gellman, a religiously adequate conception of God would be one where God is that being for whom it would be most appropriate to love “with a love than which there can be no greater.” Jerome Gellman, “God: A Perfectly Good Being,” (forthcoming). This criterion, argues Gellman, would deliver all the other religiously salient attributes of God even if it does not yield perfection *simpliciter*.

insight into this notion sooner than we might hope in terms of its relationship to the formation of our concept of God. I am not certain one way or the other.

Another natural extension of this project would be to explore the implications of a justifying reasons account of worship-worthiness for the requiring reasons case. Saint Anselm argues in the conclusion of the *Monologion*:

It is to the supreme essence alone that we properly give the name God.... This is the kind of substance that is so pre-eminently valuable that people have to worship it: the kind of substance that one ought to pray to for help against the forces that threaten. And what is so valuable as to be worshipped, what is to be prayed to—for anything—so much as the supremely good and supremely powerful spirit that dominates and regulates all things.⁷

But what might it mean to owe God worship? One would need to have decisive reasons to worship God where failing to act on these decisive reasons would be unreasonable or impermissible. Would the requiring reasons case need additional reasons beyond what I have argued are justifying reasons? Or are the justifying reasons identical to the requiring reasons, as Anselm seems to indicate here? That is, is God's absolute perfection, his being "pre-eminently valuable," sufficient to ground a requirement to worship? What about a strong requirement to not worship any being other than God? I have argued that to worship the supremely worship-worthy being adequately, or, in a way that meaningfully corresponds to his greatness, would be to worship the supremely worship-worthy being alone. But what might be decisive reasons to adequately worship the supremely worship-worthy being? More work needs to be done here at the

7. Anselm, *Monologion*, 80.

intersections of value theory and philosophical theology/analytic theology as the subject is ripe for fruitful conversation.⁸

The final area of further engagement I will note is the relevance of thicker metaphysical commitments or concepts of God for an account of worship-worthiness. Throughout, I have not appealed to attributes such as simplicity or participation models of value to advance my case. But if simplicity is a possible attribute or participatory metaphysics a coherent model for understanding value, they are immanently relevant to an account of worship-worthiness.

For instance, being the only noncomposite being might be one way that the supremely worship-worthy being could have a maximally stable worship-worthiness status (necessary worship-worthiness). In the case of simplicity, the value gap is as wide as it could possibly be in that *it is in principle not traversable*. In forgoing the metaphysical commitments that would be required to make this case, I have allowed the supremely worship-worthy being to be, in some sense, in competition with other beings where each being exists on a single scale of value. But there is a qualitative difference between a simple being whose value is “through itself,” as Anselm would say, or underived, and a being who has a certain value in virtue of a being other than himself or through something else. Thus divine simplicity and a participation model of value might be one way to guarantee the requisite value gap for necessary worship-worthiness.⁹

8. Murphy has suggested that the question of worship-worthiness and the obligation to worship are as different as the question of whether a joke is funny and whether one should laugh at it. Others have offered similar analogies. For instance, Bayne and Nagasawa note that “someone could refuse to admire Michelangelo’s *David* despite acknowledging that the *David* is the sort of thing that it is reasonable to admire.” Murphy, *God’s Own Ethics*, 129; Bayne and Nagasawa, “The Grounds of Worship,” 303. I am doubtful as to the aptness of these analogies.

9. Note how, in this case, it seems that Nagasawa’s one trivial proposition objection does not even get off the ground. If simplicity is an attribute of an absolutely perfect being, there is no such thing as a

What is more, in the case of a simple being, we may have a grounding for the strongest version of the principle of undivided worship where the existence of a simple being places a metaphysical constraint on the range of value that might be exhibited by other beings. If a simple being existed, it most likely would be the case that the only being deserving of worship would be the supremely worship-worthy being insofar as in a world where a simple being exists, the simple being would be the only being to exhibit an underived value. It would not be the case then, that there might exist some being so impressive as to fail to satisfy the sufficient value inequality condition with respect to the supremely worship-worthy being because any being that would exist other than the supremely worship-worthy being would be on the created side of the uncreated/created distinction.¹⁰

nearly perfect being. Any being other than the supremely worship-worthy being would be valuable in virtue of its “borrowing” value from the supremely worship-worthy being.

10. Additionally, there may be a way to ground the more expansive and inclusive notion of worship in the notion that God is goodness itself. On the classical notion, our wills are oriented towards the good. It may be on this notion that every one of our actions are candidates for acts of worship insofar as we perform these actions in virtue of our disposition towards the good, or “out of reverence for God.”

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