Is There a Moral Obligation to Obey God?

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Abstract: A widespread view among theists is that there is a moral obligation to obey God's commands. In this paper, four arguments for this view are considered: the argument from beneficence; the argument from property rights; the argument from justice; and the argument from omnipotence and moral perfection. It is argued that none of these arguments succeeds in showing that there is a moral obligation to obey God's commands. The paper concludes with the suggestion that there might be, nevertheless, weighty and specifically religious (as distinct from moral) reasons to obey God.

A widespread belief among theists is that one morally ought to obey God's commands, or that disobedience to God is morally wrong. What justification do theists have for holding this view? In this paper, I examine several arguments. Each argument attempts to show that we morally ought to obey God's commands. Each argument has been held by some philosopher or theologian. But each argument, I claim, is a failure: none succeeds in showing that there is a moral obligation to obey God. If I'm right, then theists who wish to hold this view on the basis of argument will have to come up with arguments that are better than those currently available. I should say right away that I will be ignoring an obvious argument for the conclusion that we morally ought to obey God's commands: the argument from the Divine Command Theory of morality. According to that theory, what makes an action morally obligatory is that God commands it. If that theory is correct, it trivially follows that we morally ought to obey God.

I ignore this theory for two main reasons. First, the objections to the Divine Command Theory are well-known (which is not to say that the

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Theory is false). Second, I wish to aim my remarks at those theists who reject
the Divine Command Theory, but who do not wish to go so far as to say that
God’s will is completely irrelevant to what we morally ought to do. In other
words, I wish to focus on a “middle way” between two extremes: accepting
the Divine Command Theory at one extreme, and denying God any role at
all in ethics on the other extreme. On the sort of the view that interests me,
God is a source of moral obligations, but not the exclusive source.

The Concept of God

Before turning to the arguments, I should say something about the concept
of God that I’ll be assuming. The concept of God that I have in mind is the
concept of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, perfectly good creator and
sustainer of the universe. By **omnipotence** I mean the power to do anything
that doesn’t involve a logical contradiction. By **omniscience** I mean knowl­
dge of all knowable things. By **eternal** I mean everlasting, or infinite in tem­
poral duration. By **perfectly good** I mean morally perfect. By **creator and susstain­
tainer of the universe** I mean that which is responsible for the origins (if any)
of the universe, and that which keeps it in existence through some sort of
sustaining power.

This is a fancy concept of God, but it’s more or less the one that most
philosophers (and theologians) have accepted for centuries.¹ I’ll accept it too
for the purposes of discussion.

The Argument from God’s Beneficence

As I said, I’m going to examine several arguments for the view that we
morally ought to obey God’s commands. I’ll begin with an argument
Swinburne writes:

> God is a generous benefactor. One of the most fundamental human obliga­
tions (i.e. duties) is (within limits) to please our major benefactors—to do in
return for them some small favor which they request in return for the great
things they have given us. If theism is true, God is by far our greatest bene­
factor, for all our other benefactors depend for their ability to benefit us on
God’s sustaining power. We owe God a lot. Hence (within limits), if God tells
us to do certain things, it becomes our duty to do them. . . . God is thus a
source of moral obligation—his commands create moral obligations.²

In rough outline, Swinburne’s argument seems to be this:

1. We morally ought to do what our major benefactors ask us to do (within
   limits).
2. God is our greatest benefactor.
   Therefore, we morally ought to do what God commands us to do (within
   limits).

Let’s reflect on this argument.

Premise 1 asserts that we morally ought to do what our major benefac-
tors ask us to do. Swinburne adds "within limits." The reason for this addition, I assume, is the fact that a benefactor might ask a beneficiary to do something all-things-considered morally wrong—e.g., murder an innocent person. No one would want to say that the beneficiary would have a moral obligation to fulfill such a request. So there must be "limits" to what a benefactor can legitimately ask us to do. In particular, the benefactor cannot, simply by requesting its performance from a beneficiary, turn an action that would otherwise be morally wrong into an action that is morally obligatory. A fuller statement of premise 1, then, would be this:

1. If a benefactor asks a beneficiary to perform an action that is not morally wrong, then the beneficiary has a moral obligation to perform that action.

Reflection on the following case suggests that this is false. Suppose that someone offers a one million dollar contribution to your academic department. You accept. Shortly afterwards, the benefactor requests that every male member of the department wear a necktie to work. Barring unusual circumstances, there is nothing morally wrong with wearing a necktie to work. The act of wearing a necktie does not cross any moral "limits." Still, the benefactor's request seems not to create a moral obligation for you to wear a necktie. It would be morally okay for you to fail to wear one, even though your benefactor has asked you to.

The situation might have been different had you agreed to wear a necktie as a condition on receiving the contribution. No such condition was made or agreed to in the case I described, but this point suggests a revision of the argument's first premise:

1'. If a benefactor makes the performance of a certain action a condition on what's given, and this condition is accepted by the beneficiary, and the action requested is not morally wrong, then the beneficiary has a moral obligation to perform the action.

This might or might not be true. Even if it were, it would not support the doctrine that we morally ought to obey God's commands. After all, I myself never agreed with God to perform any particular actions. I doubt that the theist will conclude that it's therefore morally permissible for me to disobey God.

Perhaps there is another version of premise 1 that would help the theist's case. At the moment, I cannot think of it. I tentatively conclude that premise 1 is either false or of no use to the theist.

Still, for argument's sake, let's assume that some version premise 1 is true and applicable to God's alleged beneficence towards us. What about premise 2? Is it correct to say that God is our major benefactor?

According to Swinburne, there are two respects in which God is a major benefactor. First, God "gives us this wonderful world to enjoy." Second, "all our other benefactors depend for their ability to benefit us on God's sustaining power." In other words, God is directly responsible for all sorts of goods ("this wonderful world"). And God is indirectly responsible for all the goods that we receive from our earthly benefactors: without God's sustain-
ing power, our earthly benefactors could not continue to exist.

Let's begin with Swinburne's second claim: that God is indirectly responsible for the existence of our earthly benefactors, and is therefore a major benefactor. The difficulty with this claim is obvious: presumably, God sustains the existence of malefactors just as much as God sustains the existence of benefactors! Thus, similar reasoning would force us to conclude that God is indirectly responsible for the existence of all our earthly malefactors, and is therefore a major malefactor. If so, then God cannot seriously be said to be a benefactor. A so-called "benefactor" who is also a major malefactor to one and the same person is no benefactor.

What about Swinburne's first claim: that God is a major benefactor because God gives us this "wonderful world"? There is no question that the world contains some wonderful things—rainbows, caviar, sunsets, and so on. But it also contains some dreadful and horrible things: disease, death, destruction, and so on. If God gives us the wonderful things, God also gives us (at least some of) the dreadful and horrible things. Only a philosopher could say with a straight face that such a being is a "major benefactor."

Swinburne might complain that by arguing in this way, I am forgetting about the concept of God that I said I would be assuming. According to that concept, God is morally perfect. Thus, in accusing God of being a major malefactor, I am really denying that God is morally perfect.

But I am not accusing God of being a major malefactor. My point is that Swinburne's argument seems to lead us to that conclusion. Rather than accusing God of being a major malefactor, I am claiming that Swinburne relies on an argument that would lead to such an accusation. Thus, it seems to me that a theist such as Swinburne should try to find some way to say that although God does create and sustain the universe, God is not for that reason either a major benefactor or a major malefactor. Of course, if the theist does find some way to say that, then the argument from beneficence evaporates.

I conclude that the argument from God's supposed beneficence does not show that we morally ought to obey God's commands. The premise that we morally ought to obey our major benefactors, even within limits, is either false or not applicable to the case of God's alleged beneficence. Besides, even if Swinburne could show that God is a "major benefactor," parallel reasoning would show that God is a major malefactor.

**The Argument from Property Rights**

I now turn to a second argument: the argument from property rights. The general line of reasoning is this. God created and sustains everything in the universe. Thus, the universe is rightfully God's. Everything in it is God's property. Because of this, God has property rights over everything in the universe—including human beings. We too are God's property. Because we are God's property, God has the right to command us to do whatever He wishes us to do. And because God has this right, we are morally bound to obey. In other words:
1. Everything is God's property.
2. If y is x's property, then y has a moral obligation to obey x's commands.

Therefore, we have a moral obligation to obey God's commands.

I think it's pretty clear that this argument fails to show that we morally ought to obey God. Indeed, each premise is indefensible.

Let's begin with the first premise, according to which everything is God's property. It was claimed that God created and sustains the universe. In order to move from this to the conclusion that everything is God's property, something more must be assumed. Perhaps it's the following principle:

P1 If x creates and sustains y, then y is x's property.

Some attention to the notion of sustains is required in order to understand P1. I believe that when theists say that God "sustains" the universe and everything in it, they assume something like the following definition:

S x sustains y if and only if x has some power, such that if x were to withdraw that power, then y would cease to exist.

To say that God sustains the universe and everything in it, then, is to say that God has a power such that if God were to withdraw it, the universe and everything in it would cease to exist.

It seems to me that P1 is false. Suppose that a man steals a bunch of automobile parts from a junkyard. Out of those parts, he creates a sculpture. He attaches a bomb to the sculpture, so that he has the power to blow it into bits should the need to do so arise. In other words, the man sustains what he created. Still, it does not seem to me that the sculpture is the man's property. It is made entirely of stolen parts. Thus, P1 seems to be false.

This problem can be fixed. Presumably, God did not steal anything in order to create the universe. The materials, if any, with which God did the job were either no one's property or God's. This suggests that the principle in question is not P1, but rather:

P2 If x creates y out of material that is no one else's property, and x sustains y, then y is x's property.

P2 might be an improvement over P1, but it too is false. To see why, let's imagine a science-fiction case. Suppose that a brilliant but twisted scientist legitimately obtains some viable human gametes—sperm and eggs. Suppose the scientist fertilizes the egg with the sperm, and puts the zygote into an artificial womb. During the gestation period, the scientist implants a self-destruction device deep inside the fetus's brain, so that the scientist can blow his "experiment" into bits should the need to do so arise. After nine months of development, the fetus is removed from the artificial womb, and raised in the normal way. Suppose, finally, that the child develops into an adult. (The self-destruction device remains in place all the while.)

As I see it, the scientist created this adult out of material that was no one else's property. The scientist also sustains the adult, since the scientist can destroy it simply by activating the internal self-destruction device. Yet, the adult seems not to be the scientist's property. Thus, P2 is false.
Suppose for argument's sake that premise 1 could be defended by appeal to some principle akin to P2. Even so, premise 2 is false. Consider an adult who is the parent of two children. Suppose further, for argument's sake, that these children are the adult's property. Suppose, finally, that the adult commands one child to kill the other. If premise 2 were true, it would follow that one child now has a moral obligation to kill the other. This is absurd. The child has no such obligation (even if the parent will intervene at the last moment to prevent any harm).

Thus, the argument from property rights is a failure. As I see it, premise 1 lacks any credible support, and premise 2 is plainly false. We'll have to look elsewhere for a sound argument for the view that we morally ought to obey God.

**The Argument from Justice**

Perhaps we can find it in the argument from justice. It goes something like this. Intelligence deserves respect, as do power, goodness, and creativity. At any rate, we respect people who are especially intelligent, powerful, good, or creative. But God possesses all of these properties to the utmost degree: God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good, and the creator of the universe. Thus, if ordinary human beings deserve respect in virtue of their possession of limited quantities of intelligence, power, goodness, and creativity, then God, who has these qualities without limit, deserves our utmost respect. Disobedience, however, is a form of disrespect. A disobedient child shows disrespect for the parent. A disobedient soldier shows disrespect for his commanding officer. A disobedient student shows disrespect for the teacher. Thus, God deserves our obedience. And if God deserves our obedience, then justice requires our obedience to God, since justice is a matter of getting what's deserved. Finally, if justice requires our obedience to God, then we morally should obey God. Thus, we morally should obey God. In premise-conclusion form:

1. God deserves our utmost respect.
2. If 1, then God deserves our obedience.
3. If God deserves our obedience, then justice requires our obedience to God.
4. If justice requires our obedience to God, then we morally should obey God.
Therefore, we morally should obey God.

I believe that the "problem of evil" poses a serious challenge to premise 1. Given the appearance of so much evil—especially so much natural evil—it is hard to believe that God deserves our utmost respect. For how can we give our utmost respect to a being who has the power to prevent diseases, hurricanes, earthquakes, and so on, but who does not exercise that power? Perhaps such a being deserves our awe, but it's not clear that it would deserve our respect. For argument's sake, however, I will assume that the theist has a plausible theodicy. In other words, I will accept premise 1.
One might challenge premise 4. The assumption behind it appears to be that everything required by justice is also morally required, or that every just act is also a morally right act. This assumption is false. Some just acts are morally wrong. So, for example, suppose the police capture a murderous thug. He deserves to have the book thrown at him. However, he has useful information that will allow the police to put away a whole gang of murderous thugs, and he will share this information only if he is freed and put in the Witness Protection Program. A life of freedom is not what the thug deserves: he deserves to be behind bars. This is what justice requires. But it would be morally irresponsible, morally wrong, for the police to allow this to happen. As I see it, the police morally ought to extract the relevant information from the thug, put him in the WPP, and go after the other members of his gang. Likewise, even if justice requires our obedience to God, it doesn't follow that we are morally obligated to obey. Indeed, one might plausibly argue (in a Kantian vein) that insofar as obedience to God (or to anyone) involves the neglect of one's "autonomy," such obedience is morally wrong.

But the real problem with the argument is premise 2. Deserved respect does not entail deserved obedience. To see this, consider the platitude that human beings deserve respect from other human beings. This may be true, but it doesn't follow that human beings deserve the obedience of other human beings. I have the utmost respect for my neighbor, and he deserves it, but I would be under no moral obligation to obey his command to help pay for his daughter's education. Likewise, God might deserve my utmost respect, but from this it doesn't follow that I have a moral obligation to obey whatever God commands. Thus, premise 2 seems false.

The situation might have been different if I had knowingly and willingly agreed to obey my neighbor's commands. But I made no such agreement. Likewise, things might have been different if I had knowingly and willingly agreed to obey God's commands. But I have made no such agreement with God.

I conclude that the argument from justice fails to show that we morally should obey God. I suspect that justice or morality requires obedience only if there has been a rational, informed agreement to obey. Clearly, not everyone has made such an agreement with God. So let's turn to the fourth argument: the argument from God's wisdom and goodness.

**God's Knowledge and Moral Perfection**

God is thought to be omniscient or all knowing. If so, then God knows everything that we morally should do. God is also thought to be morally perfect. If so, then God will never command us to do anything that we morally shouldn't do. This is because a morally perfect being would command us to do only those things that we morally should do. Thus, if God is omniscient and morally perfect, then we morally should obey God. In premise-conclusion form:
1. God is omniscient and morally perfect.
2. If 1, then God will never command us to do something that we morally should not do, and will command us to do only that which we morally should do.
3. If God will never command us to do something that we morally should not do, and will command us to do only that which we morally should do, then we morally should obey God.
Therefore, we morally should obey God.

The problem with this argument is that it reduces to triviality the view that we morally should obey God. Let me explain.

In each of the previous arguments, the fact that God is God is supposed to help create our purported moral obligation to obey God. Recall the argument from beneficence. According to it, God is a major benefactor—and this, taken together with some version of the premise that we ought to do what our benefactors ask of us, is supposed to “create” our moral obligation to obey God. Or consider the argument from property rights. On that argument, God is “responsible” for the creation and sustenance of the universe. That fact (if it is a fact) is among those that, taken together, supposedly creates the moral obligation to obey God. Or take the argument from justice. There, the fact (if it is a fact) that God is worthy or deserving of our utmost respect is part of what’s supposed to create the moral obligation to obey God.

In this last argument, however, the nature of God does not play even a partial role in creating our supposed moral obligation to obey God’s commands. The fact (if it’s a fact) that God is omniscient and morally perfect does not create, or play any part in creating, any such obligation. Indeed, the argument does not show that there is any obligation to obey God. At most, it shows that there are various moral duties revealed to us by God, and we are obligated to obey them. One might put this by saying that we morally should obey God’s commands, but this is just an extremely misleading way of saying that there are things that we morally should or should not do, and that we learn of these things through God. This is not an interesting version of the idea that we morally should obey God. Instead, it is a version of the idea that God is a conveyer of moral knowledge.

One might argue that God’s role as a conveyer of moral knowledge is crucial, since only God has direct access to morality. We mortals have only indirect access, or indirect knowledge, of what morality requires or forbids of us. We must rely completely on our knowledge of what God commands and forbids in order to know what we morally should or should not do. This is because direct knowledge of morality is impossible for us, and possible only for God. On this view, God is not a mere spokesman for morality. God is the only possible spokesman for morality, since only God has direct knowledge of what morality requires or forbids.

This line of reasoning is flawed. It says that we can’t have direct knowledge of morality, but implies that we have direct knowledge of God’s existence, God’s nature, and God’s commands. But if we can have direct knowledge of such difficult and profound theological truths, then what could possibly be the reason for denying that we can have direct knowledge of moral
truths? Is the fact that the torture and killing of innocent children is morally wrong so much more difficult to comprehend and know than the fact (if it’s a fact) that God exists, is omniscient and morally perfect, and commands us to not torture and kill innocent children? Doesn’t that second, theological fact (if it’s a fact) seem much more difficult to know than the first, simple, moral fact? If so, then it’s false that only God has direct access to morality. We do too. And if we do, then we don’t necessarily need God to tell us what we morally should or should not do. We can (and we mostly do) figure it out for ourselves.

I conclude that the fourth argument fails to show that there’s any interesting sense in which it’s true to say that we morally should obey God’s commands.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I considered four arguments for the conclusion that we morally should obey God’s commands: the argument from God’s beneficence, the argument from property rights, the argument from justice, and the argument from God’s moral perfection and omniscience. I argued that none proves that there is any interesting sense in which we morally should obey God. By way of conclusion, I’d like to consider some possible misunderstandings and objections to what I’ve said.

Someone might confuse my thesis with the view that there’s no reason at all to obey God. I want to emphasize that nothing I’ve said implies any such thing. I’ve not argued that there’s no reason to obey God. Indeed, if it’s true that God will punish disobedience and reward obedience, then there might be good prudential reasons for obeying God. (Though it might be difficult to act from that motive and at the same time be suitably “religious.”) My main point is simply this: If there is a reason to obey God’s commands, it isn’t a moral reason.

This thesis might be confused with the claim that it is immoral, or morally wrong, to obey God. That would be a serious misunderstanding. Nothing I have said implies that it would be morally wrong to obey God. If God were to command you to do something that also happens to be morally right, then of course it would be morally right for you to do it. My thesis is not that morality’s requirements and God’s commands cannot or do not coincide. My point is that even if they do, this does not show that there is a moral obligation to obey God’s commands. The coincidence of God’s commands and morality’s demands would show only that what God commands is also, but for independent reasons, what we morally ought to do.

Another possible response is that all the arguments I’ve considered are based on an outdated and implausible conception of God. On the conception I’ve assumed—the classical conception—God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good, and the creator and sustainer of the universe. This conception is rejected by some contemporary theologians, who have been deeply influenced by the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles
Hartshorne. They call themselves “process theologians.” The process theologians contend, among other things, that God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Rather, on this conception, God is a being without infinite knowledge, without infinite power—indeed, a being who can and does suffer along with His creatures. If this conception is correct, then the arguments I’ve considered are merely straw men. They are based on a concept of God that no serious thinker believes in anymore.

In reply, I would point out—first—that some serious theologians and philosophers continue to accept the classical conception of God. Second, even if the classical conception had been universally abandoned in favor of the process conception, the question would still arise: Is there any moral reason to obey God? If the process theologians say “no,” then I have no quarrel with them. If they say “yes,” then I would like to see the arguments.

A final objection is this. Suppose that there is no moral reason to obey God. As noted earlier, this does not show that there is no reason to obey God. So, for example, there could be prudential reasons to obey God. The idea here, however, is that there might be reasons for obeying God that are neither moral nor prudential. In particular, there are religious reasons for obeying God, and these reasons are at least as weighty or important—perhaps more so—than moral reasons. On this view, there are at least three sorts of reason for action in general: prudential, moral, and religious. Religious reasons rank just as high if not higher than moral reasons in terms of “importance.” So, even if there is no moral reason for action, there might still be a religious reason—and a perfectly good one—to obey God.

As I see it, this is the only promising response to the view that there is no moral reason to obey God. The response concedes that there is no moral obligation, but says, in effect, “So what? There are religious reasons to obey God, and these are just as important if not more important than moral reasons.” To make this response plausible, however, much more work is required. We would need a theory about the nature of reasons; a convincing account of the specific sorts of reasons that exist; some conception of the differing degrees of “importance” that different sorts of reasons allegedly possess; and an account of the ways (if any) in which conflicts among different sorts of reasons might be rationally settled. Obviously, this is not the place to tackle all those issues.

In the meantime, the important thing to bear in mind is this. Even if there are specifically religious reasons to obey God, and even if those reasons are at least as important as moral reasons, we would still have to face the rather startling conclusion: theists and philosophers—or at least those who do not accept the Divine Command Theory of morality—have yet to justify the view that we have a moral obligation to obey God.

References

1. In the last fifty years or so, there has been a movement by theologians away from this concept of God, and toward a concept according to which God is not omniscient or omnipotent—indeed, toward a God that is capable of suffering. I ignore
those developments for the moment, and revisit them in the concluding section.


3. Of course, it might be *prudent* to wear a necktie—especially if your department depends for its existence on the generosity of this particular donor, who will withdraw her support if you do not fulfill her sartorial wishes. In other words, it might be that you *prudentially* ought to wear a necktie. But from this it does not follow that you *morally* ought to.

4. Ibid., 14.

5. Ibid., 14.

6. In fairness to Swinburne, he does take up the problem of natural evil. His claim, in brief, is that the existence of natural evil gives us important opportunities for knowledge and for the performance of praiseworthy actions (*Is There a God?* 107–13). Perhaps this is so, but it fails to explain the *amount* of natural evil. Why so much? Another difficulty is this: If God allows human beings to suffer from horrible diseases in order for us to express courage and to gain knowledge (see Swinburne, 110), then isn’t God guilty of using human beings as mere means?

7. Swinburne appears to endorse (elements of) this argument, too: “... God as the author of our being has certain rights, a certain authority over us, which we do not have over our fellow humans. He is the cause of our existence at each moment of our existence and sustains the laws of nature which give us everything we are and have” (op. cit., 104–5). The theologian R. C. Mortimer is somewhat more explicit: “God made us and all the world. Because of that He has an absolute claim on our obedience. We do not exist in our own right, but only as His creatures, who ought therefore to do and be what He desires.” *Christian Ethics* (London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1950), 7–8, quoted in Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 66. A similar view is held by the philosopher Baruch Brody, who seems to endorse the following principle: “Actions are right (wrong) for us to do just in case and only because God, who has created us and owns us and whom we therefore have an obligation to follow, wants us to do (refrain from doing) them.” See his "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 150. Locke also seems to endorse the argument from property rights, or at least the idea that we are God’s property: “For men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker, all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order and about his business, they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another’s pleasure,” Second Treatise on Government, quoted in David Gauthier, “Why Ought One Obey God,” in *The Social Contract Theorists*, ed. Christopher Morris (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 77.

8. Elements of this argument, if not the argument entire, are endorsed by various theologians and philosophers—for instance John Calvin: “For since we, with all that is ours, are deep in debt to his majesty, whatever he requires of us he claims with perfect right as a debt.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book II, chapter VIII, section 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 370. Hobbes: “He that will attribute to God nothing but what is warranted by natural reason must either use such negative attributes as infinite, eternal, incomprehensible; or superlatives, as Most High, Most Great, and the like; or indefinite, as good, just, holy, creator; and in such sense, as if he meant not to declare what he is ... but how much we admire him, and how ready we would be to obey him; which is a sign of humility, and of a will to honor him as much as we can,” and “obedience to his laws ... is the greatest worship of all.” *Levathan*, chapter 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 251. Richard Price: “Our obligation to obey God’s will means nothing, but that obedience is due to it, or that it is right and fit to comply with it,” and “What has now been said [viz., that we have a duty to obey God], is, in some degree, applicable to superiors and benefactors among created beings; and the grounds of duty to them are, in their
general nature, the same with those of our duty to the Deity. A fellow-man may be raised so much above us in station and character, and so little within the reach of any of the effects of what we can do, that the reason of the respect and submission we pay him, and of our general behavior to him, cannot be any view to his benefit, but principally, or solely the sense of what is in itself right, decent, or becoming," *British Moralists*, vol. II (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 166, 178. Samuel Clarke: "that God is infinitely superior to men; is as clear, as that infinity is larger than a point, or eternity longer than a moment. And it is as certainly fit, that men should honor and worship, obey and imitate God," ibid., vol. I, 193.

9. Perhaps it will be objected that if my neighbor issues such a command, then this removes or at least seriously compromises any reasons that I might have had for respecting him. After all, only a strange and unreasonable person would command me to underwrite the costs of his daughter's education. This is a dangerous reply, however, since God's purported command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (for example) is surely more strange and unreasonable than my neighbor's command. Thus, if my neighbor would deserve less respect in virtue of making his command, then God would deserve less respect in virtue of His.

10. This argument is suggested by William Clarke: "[God] will wrong no one. He judges all in perfect fairness, and never cherishes an unfair thought concerning any. He insists upon all that ought to be insisted upon, and nothing more. . . . He is sure to conduct his universe as it ought to be conducted. Such is the justice of a holy God. It enables him, when he commands men to do right, to point to himself as their example and inspiration, saying, 'I also do right.'" *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 12th edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 93. This passage also is suggestive of the argument from justice.

11. Swinburne (Is There a God?) is an example.

12. I think this is one way to understand Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, and in particular the idea that the religious "transcends" the ethical.

13. I try to tell some of this story in "Just Plain 'Ought,'" unpublished manuscript.

14. Versions of this paper were delivered to audiences at Muhlenberg College and West Chester University. I am grateful to those audiences for their comments and suggestions. For helpful criticisms of previous drafts of this paper, I am grateful to Fred Feldman, George Panichas, and Erik Wielenberg. Thanks also to Frank Hoffman, who provided me with the occasion to think about this topic.