

Wholly Good, Holy God

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ABSTRACT: Mark Murphy dedicates *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* to answering two questions: What is divine holiness? And why does it matter for understanding divine action? According to Murphy, divine holiness consists in God's having those features that make it appropriate for creatures to be simultaneously attracted to and repelled by God. This account, in turn, affords a novel framework for understanding divine action, one intended to avoid the pitfalls of alternative approaches emphasizing God's moral goodness or lovingkindness. In this essay, we express agreement with Murphy's idea that divine holiness is crucial for understanding divine action. But we find ourselves balking at two significant junctures. First, we contend that Murphy's characterization of divine holiness requires revision, as appeal to attraction and repulsion doesn't adequately capture attitudes such as awe and reverence that are central to experiences of the holy. And, second, we argue that the 'holiness framework' for divine action fails to accomplish its aims, largely because it rejects the claim that God's perfect moral goodness and lovingkindness ground God's holiness. We conclude that theorists should instead embrace a framework for action that integrates God's perfect moral goodness, lovingkindness, and holiness.

Imagine that everything you learned about God was gleaned from reading philosophy books. You have learned such things as: God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omnipresent. And you have come to appreciate that there is considerable controversy about how to understand these notions. But you would not have learned that God is *holy*. For until now, no philosophy book has taken up the issue of God's holiness, let alone offered an account of what it is. This is astonishing, as the theme of God's holiness is ubiquitous in the Abrahamic traditions. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to identify a more prominent theme in the worship of some Christian traditions, such as Eastern Orthodoxy.

Mark Murphy's *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* is the first full-scale treatment of divine holiness in the philosophical literature. As its title indicates, Murphy's book provides a characterization of what divine holiness is. But this characterization is in the service of a larger aim, which is to explore why divine holiness matters for understanding divine action. A pair of convictions animates Murphy's discussion of this issue. First, we should not understand God as necessarily motivated by whether an action would be morally good or loving; what Murphy calls the "morality framework" and the "love framework" for divine action are deeply flawed. Second, what Murphy dubs the "holiness framework" for divine action affords a "fresh way" to think "about problems of divine action that are both topics of perennial Christian concern and staples of the contemporary literature in philosophical theology" (109).¹ The bulk of Murphy's book consists in illustrating how the holiness framework for divine

¹ All references to Murphy's work in this article concern (Murphy 2019).

action can help to resolve thorny issues in the Christian tradition, such as the rationale for God's creative activity, the incarnation, and the atonement.

We are deeply sympathetic to the idea that divine holiness deserves the sort of probing and perceptive treatment provided by Murphy's book. But we find ourselves balking at two significant junctures. We think that Murphy's characterization of divine holiness requires revision. The first part of this essay presents our reasons for this assessment. And we think that it would be a mistake to reject the morality and love frameworks in favor of the holiness framework of divine action. Instead, we should embrace a framework for divine action that integrates God's perfect goodness, lovingkindness, and holiness. This verdict receives defense in the second and third parts of our discussion.

1.

Murphy endorses an "experience-first" methodology according to which we begin with experience of the holy in order to formulate an account of what holiness is (9-10). In order to characterize this experience, Murphy borrows from Rudolf Otto's highly influential account: to experience something as holy is to be simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by it.² The attraction consists in the desire to be unified with what is holy; the repulsion consists in experiencing oneself as unfit to stand in any such unification relation. This characterization of holiness experience forms the backbone of Murphy's account of holiness: to be holy is to have those features that make it appropriate to have the attraction and repulsion responses described above (45; *cf.* 34-5). The account remains deliberately non-committal about which features render these responses fitting; in principle, rival views could fill in the details differently. Murphy's interest lies in applying the view to God, the *absolutely* holy one. Here the claim is that what renders God absolutely holy is God's absolute perfection (80). Murphy glosses such perfection in terms of God's unlimited power, knowledge, beauty, and the like (48).

While an experience-first methodology strikes us as potentially fruitful, its successful execution depends on accurately and perspicuously characterizing experience of the holy. We harbor worries about whether Murphy's discussion succeeds on this score. Our primary concern is that his characterization fails to capture attitudes, such as awe and reverence, often involved in paradigmatic and fitting experiences of the holy.

Begin with experiences of those things that possess "secondary" or derivative holiness, such as holy water, icons, eucharistic elements, and the like. In traditions in which they play a prominent role, such as Eastern Orthodoxy, we are called to respond to them with awe and

² The type of holiness in question is what Murphy calls "primary" holiness. In some places, Murphy speaks of experience *of* the holy; in others, he speaks of experience of something *as* holy. In still others, he talks of the holiness experience. These phenomena seem importantly different. For example, experience of the holy does not imply experiencing it as holy, since one may fail to recognize its holiness. Similarly, experience of something as holy needn't be an experience of the holy, since the experience may be nonveridical. Given that Murphy's discussion focuses on attraction and repulsion, we suspect that he has experiencing something *as* holy in mind. If that is correct, we're still unsure whether Murphy has done enough to successfully pinpoint the experience he wishes to characterize. For under a natural interpretation, experiencing something as holy requires conceptualizing it as holy. But it seems to us that (say) children could have the attraction/repulsion experience that Murphy describes without conceptualizing what they experience as holy. We would like Murphy to say more about these matters. But for present purposes, we'll follow Murphy in moving freely between speaking of experience of the holy, experiencing something as holy, and the holiness experience.

reverence. If we're called to have such attitudes toward what has secondary holiness, then presumably we are also called to have these attitudes toward what possesses absolute holiness. Given the additional assumption that in central cases agents actually have the attitudes toward the holy that they're called to have, it follows that paradigm and fitting experiences of the holy centrally involve awe and reverence.

Scripture supports this conclusion. For example, in *The Revelation of John* (ch. 4), the winged creatures are reported to sing "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty" in God's presence. The elders are said to thereupon fall on their faces before God. This action, so regularly performed in Christian worship, is expressive of awe and reverence. This represents a second reason to believe that paradigm and fitting responses to absolute holiness involve awe and reverence.

Often experience of something's being some way is a response to what makes it that way. For example, we often have fitting experiences of indignation toward morally blameworthy agents. This is often because we're attuned to what makes them blameworthy, such as their having acted wrongly without excuse. Similarly, if the argument above is correct, agents are plausibly viewed as responding to God's holiness with awe and reverence. On the assumption that experience of God's absolute holiness is often responsive to what makes God holy—which for Murphy is God's unsurpassable greatness—this would make sense. For awe and reverence are fitting responses to such greatness.

We have just argued that awe and reverence are responses centrally involved in paradigmatic and fitting experiences of the holy. If these attitudes fall outside of Murphy's attraction/repulsion scheme, as Murphy indicates (26), then the scheme fails to accurately capture experience of the holy. But might these attitudes somehow fall within the scheme? Not as Murphy explicates it. If awe and reverence were to fall within the scheme, then they must be modes of attraction, and on Murphy's view, the attraction involved in the experience of the holy is the desire for unification. However, attitudes of reverence and awe seem to have nothing essentially to do with unification. If anything, when we experience them, it is in the context of being stopped short by the awesomeness or beauty of something. So it is perfectly possible for experience of the holy to consist in someone being in awe of, and yet not desire to be unified with, what is holy. (Awe and reverence may involve the desire to be in the presence of the holy, but this falls well short of the desire to be *unified* with the holy.) We take this point to support the conclusion that awe and reverence do not themselves include any such desire. The upshot is that the attraction/repulsion scheme as Murphy explicates it fails to accurately characterize experience of the holy, as it fails to give awe and reverence their central place in such experience.

This is problematic for Murphy's account of the nature of holiness. For recall that, according to Murphy, what it is to be holy is to have those features that make it appropriate to have experience of the holy. This means that adequately characterizing what it is to be holy requires correctly characterizing experience of the holy. We've just argued that the view Murphy advances does not accomplish this, as it omits important attitudes such as awe and reverence.

Murphy could do one of two things to overcome this concern. He might expand his understanding of the attraction involved in experiences of the holy to explicitly include awe and reverence. Or Murphy might supplement the attraction/repulsion scheme, adding awe and reverence as distinct components of the holiness experience. Either approach is compatible with an experience-first methodology. Both would make experience of the holy more complex and heterogeneous than Murphy's official account allows, which we think would be a welcome result. For the record, we believe the second approach is preferable. It

allows for there to be experiences of the holy that centrally involve awe and reverence but not attraction and repulsion. The sort of case we have in mind, common to mystical experience, involves being awe-struck, stopped short to the extent that awareness of oneself drops out. In such a case, a person does not think of herself at all, let alone about whether she is fit to be in the presence of a holy being.

2.

God's holiness is a sufficiently fascinating topic that one could envision dedicating a book simply to offering an account of what it is. As noted earlier, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* has wider aims. It develops a view about the ways in which holiness bears upon divine action, providing a new framework for such action. By a "framework for divine action," Murphy means a "scheme by which divine action can be explained and predicted, and which applies to the divine being simply because that being is divine" (81). The dominant frameworks for divine action in contemporary philosophy of religion are ones that necessarily appeal to either morality or love. That is, they are frameworks according to which God is necessarily motivated by considerations of either morality or love. Both frameworks for action, Murphy contends, are deeply flawed because they incorrectly presuppose that God is necessarily morally good or loving.

Below, we'll explore the issue of whether Murphy's pessimistic assessment of these frameworks is correct. For now, let's consider what he calls the "holiness framework." According to this scheme, since it is unfitting for creatures to be too closely unified with God, there are requiring reasons for God not to draw too near to creatures and also to ensure that creatures are repelled from God (112).³ These considerations are "status reasons," where status reasons are considerations that favor the performance or non-performance of an action because it would be beneath one given one's status (112-118; cf. 120, 127). To use an example inspired by Murphy, Roger Federer has a status reason not to play a tennis match against a rank novice at the local country club; doing so would be beneath him. So also God has status reasons not to be unified with any creature, since doing so would be beneath God given God's holiness. This is not to say that God lacks moral reasons and reasons of love to act. Murphy thinks that God has such reasons. It is just that God does not have these reasons necessarily since God is not necessarily morally good and loving (84). Hence God could only be contingently motivated by them. They would be merely justifying reasons or "rational opportunities"—reasons that "do not in any way necessitate divine action" (134, 133).

Central to Murphy's case for the holiness framework is that it yields the correct results whereas rival ones do not. Rather than imply that God necessarily creates, as the morality and love frameworks allegedly do, the holiness framework dictates that the default is that God refrains from creating (134). This squares with the mainstream Christian tradition, according to which creation is a contingent matter (138). Further, the framework accounts for the "normative weirdness" of the incarnation—how could a holy God have adequate reason to become incarnate?—while also accounting for Christ's impeccability (Ch. 8). Moreover, the holiness framework promises a satisfactory treatment of the atonement. Any such treatment

³ Murphy borrows from Gert (2004) a way of characterizing reasons according to which they are either justifying or requiring. Reasons of the latter sort are ones that agents must rationally act on in the absence of sufficiently powerful countervailing considerations (94). We ourselves are uncomfortable with this way of thinking about reasons, but will employ it in order to ensure that our discussion meshes with Murphy's.

must identify the primary obstacle to divine-human unity that the atonement removes. The most developed application of the love framework to the atonement, Eleonore Stump's *Atonement* (2018), identifies the obstacle with a psychological state; our wills remain resistant to God's grace. By contrast, the holiness framework rightly identifies the primary obstacle as normative: we are unfit to be unified with an absolutely holy God given our sinful condition (199).

We find ourselves unpersuaded by these claims. We doubt that the holiness framework performs as well as Murphy maintains and also whether his discussion engages with the most powerful rival frameworks.

To make this case, let us step back in order to identify what a satisfactory framework for divine action should accomplish. In our estimation, any adequate framework should accommodate and explain the following claims:

- (a) There is something surprising about God's actions to create, become incarnate, and atone.
- (b) God has good reasons to engage in these actions, although some of these reasons may not be decisive.
- (c) God has reasons to keep distance from human beings.

We take these to be theory-neutral, uncontroversial starting points for theorizing about divine action with which Murphy agrees.

We propose to focus on claims (b) and (c). The holiness framework accommodates and explains (b): though God has requiring status reasons to not create, become incarnate, and atone, God has adequate justifying reasons rooted in God's love to do these things. However, we doubt that Murphy's view has the resources to substantiate these claims. Specifically, given that God has powerful requiring reasons not to perform the actions mentioned above, it is difficult to see how God's love could provide adequate justifying reasons to perform them. Otherwise put, we're worried about how it could be a *rational* option for God to do these things, given the weight of God's status reasons to not create, become incarnate, and atone.

At one point, Murphy responds to a similar worry by pointing out that God *did* create and become incarnate and, so, God must have these justifying reasons (187; *cf.* 156). Yet we continue to wonder. After all, the fact that God performed these actions could cut in either of two directions. It could support Murphy's idea that God has adequate justifying reasons to create, become incarnate, or atone, even though it is hard to see how. Or it could count against the holiness framework because the framework makes it not just surprising but utterly perplexing how God could be rational in creating, becoming incarnate, or atoning. Given this, we doubt that appeal to what God has in fact done removes the worry just aired.

Now consider claim (c). Our concern is not whether Murphy's view can accommodate and explain this claim. Surely it can by appealing to God's status reasons. Nor is our worry about whether there are status reasons. As mentioned above, we think there are. Instead, our concern is that Murphy's account of what makes something a status reason is incorrect and that a more nearly accurate account implies that there is no status reason for God to keep God's distance from human beings.

To substantiate these concerns, it will be helpful to have Murphy's account of status reasons laid out in more detail. We understand Murphy's view to run as follows: when an agent *A*'s value is significantly greater than *B*'s, it is thereby unfitting for *A* to be unified with *B* in a

broad sense that may include being engaged in shared projects with *B*, having an emotional connection to *B*, or enjoying *B*'s company. This unfittingness, in turn, grounds a status reason for *A* to keep distance from *B*. Value gaps of this sort admit of different grounds, including differences in ontological status or excellence (112-20). Though the status reasons could be of different strengths, Murphy seems to hold they are requiring ones.

We can evaluate this account by reflecting on two sorts of cases. Consider one in which a hummingbird regularly visits the cherry blossoms outside your window. There is a significant gap in ontological status and, so, a significant value gap between you and the hummingbird. But it is not unfitting for you to connect with it in various ways by doing such things as leaving out sugar water for it to drink, and simply enjoying the bird's company. So there is no status reason, let alone a requiring one, for you to refrain from connecting with the hummingbird and other visiting birds and animals. As a second case, imagine that the baseball great, Justin Verlander, has decided to play in a local charity baseball game. There is a huge gap in skill and, so, a value gap between Verlander and the non-professionals who play in the game. But it is not unfitting for Verlander to join in. So there is no status reason for him to refrain from playing, let alone a requiring reason not to do so. For participating in the event is not beneath Verlander in a normatively significant way. If it were, it would be problematic to ask Verlander to participate in the game, and he'd be liable to criticism, blame, pity, or the like, for participating. None of this is true. So Verlander has no status reason to refrain from participating in the charity event, let alone a requiring one, even though his skill-based excellence dwarfs that of other participants. Indeed, it would be obnoxious of Verlander to refuse to play simply for this reason.

Murphy has available a strategy of response to these cases, one to which he may be committed. According to this strategy, in the hummingbird case, there is a requiring status reason for you to keep your distance from the bird, but there is justifying reason to connect with it. In the baseball case, there is a requiring status reason for Verlander not to participate in the charity event, but justifying reason for him to do so. We are dubious. In the hummingbird case, it would be odd to suppose that, because of your higher status, you rationally must refrain from engaging with the bird unless you had an adequate justifying reason to engage. This would make refraining the normative default. But, as best we can tell, there is no such default; the option to engage or not engage are rationally on a par. Something similar is true of the baseball case. It is not as if, due to his excellence, Verlander rationally must refrain from playing in the game unless he has an adequate justifying reason to participate. Again, this would make refraining the normative default. But it doesn't appear as if it is; in fact, we see no requiring status reasons in play at all.

There seems to us good grounds, then, for rejecting Murphy's account of status reasons. Is there a more promising account of what they are? Here is a proposal, one that emphasizes their context-sensitivity: what makes something a status reason for *A* to refrain from ϕ ing in a given context is not just the value gap between *A* and *B*, but that ϕ ing would express something untrue about the value gap, namely, that there is no such gap (or that the gap is much smaller than it is). To return to our earlier example, Verlander's participating in the charity event expresses nothing untrue about his excellence vis-à-vis other players; so it's not beneath him (in a normatively relevant sense) to participate in it. By contrast, in typical contexts, Verlander's playing for a middling minor league team expresses that his skill level or excellence is commensurate with other players on the team. But since that isn't the case, playing for the minor league team is beneath him (in a normatively relevant sense) in typical

contests. This explains why there is no status reason in the first scenario, while in the second there often is.

Let's now apply what we've said to the case of God. The fact that there is a huge value gap between Creator and creature would not as such provide a status reason for the Creator not to engage with and be unified with the creation. Further, we doubt that creating, becoming incarnate, or atoning would express something untrue about the value gap, namely, that there is no such gap (or that the gap is much smaller than it is). God's engaging with and unifying Godself with elements of the creation no more expresses the fact that God is somehow on the same level as the creation as your connecting with a hummingbird expresses that you are on the same value level as it, or that Verlander is on the same skill-level as other participants in the charity game. It follows that there is no status reason for God to refrain from creating, becoming incarnate, or atoning, as doing these things is not beneath God in any normatively relevant sense.

The conclusion we reach is that Murphy's view may accommodate and explain

(c) God has reasons to keep distance from human beings.

But the view's account of why God has these reasons, we believe, misses the mark. Since the holiness framework is predicated on the claim that requiring status reasons explain why God has default requiring reasons not to create, become incarnate, or atone, we conclude that our argument provides evidence against that framework.

It is natural to wonder whether an alternative framework does better, both accommodating and explaining (a)-(c) above while also being well-positioned to substantiate any claims used to do so. In our judgment, there is such a framework. According to this alternative

God's holiness, that which renders holiness experience appropriate, is grounded in God's perfections.

God's essential perfections include being morally good and loving. These perfections partially ground God's holiness.

The leading idea here is that, rather than *contrast* God's holiness with God's moral goodness and lovingkindness, as the holiness framework does, a satisfactory framework for divine action should integrate these perfections with God's holiness by grounding the latter in the former. By integrating these qualities in this way, this alternative framework accommodates (and partially explains) (a)-(c). Moreover, the claims it invokes to do these things, we judge, are not vulnerable to the types of concerns raised above regarding Murphy's view. Nor are they vulnerable to the criticisms that Murphy presses against the morality and love frameworks.

Though these claims deserve a full-scale treatment, we can make a start. Begin with claim

(a) There is something surprising about God's actions to create, become incarnate, and atone.

Any position according to which the members of the Trinity live in perfect harmony and love will render it surprising that God creates. For creating would not remedy any lack in the

Godhead (or, arguably, enhance the quality of God's life).⁴ But having created, it is not surprising that God endeavors to engage with and be united with various elements of the creation, given God's love for creation. This, however, is compatible with it being highly surprising that God has done so in the ways God has. God could have accomplished these things in a variety of manners. That the second person of the Trinity became incarnate, suffered, died, and was resurrected is highly surprising. If these claims are correct, when suitably supplemented with orthodox Christian commitments, the alternative framework sketched above can handle (a).

Turn now to

(b) God has good reasons to engage in these actions, although some of these reasons may not be decisive.

We've just indicated why, under any orthodox Christian view, it will be difficult to see what good reasons there are for God to create. But unlike the holiness framework, the alternative framework we've sketched doesn't make the problem *worse*, rendering it even more surprising why God would create. By drawing upon certain characteristics of mutual love that exist between members of the Trinity, such as its tendency to express itself in creative and diverse ways, it may even provide resources to address it. Moreover, unlike the holiness framework, the alternative framework does not make God's decision to become incarnate and atone deeply perplexing. Instead, since these actions would express God's essentially loving and morally unsurpassable character, the alternative framework accommodates and helps to explain them. And it does this without implying that God must redeem creation in some particular way. If we're correct about this, the alternative framework also accommodates and explains (b).

Finally, there is the claim that

(c) God has reason to keep distance from human beings.

Like the holiness framework, the alternative we're considering implies that God's holiness provides reason for God to keep distance from human beings (at least as they are). For recall that, according to the alternative framework, God is holy in virtue of being unsurpassably morally good. Human beings, in contrast, are deeply twisted: defiant, destructive, dishonest, deluded. They have deeply wronged and are prone to wrong God by (inter alia) repeatedly visiting misery on each other and the creation. Now add that humans have often expressed and are prone to express little interest in reconciling with God. Nor have they tended to take responsibility for what they've done to each other, the creation, and God. Plausibly, though, morally good agents who are subject to such mistreatment have moral reason to keep their

⁴ In Ch. 7, Murphy argues that the morality framework is "hard to square" with the claim that God did not have to create at all, for this framework dictates that God would be "bound to promote the well-being of rational creatures" (138). We disagree. Perhaps some variants of the framework are not easily squared with "contingentarianism" about creation, but not all are. According to one plausible variant of the morality framework, there is no requiring moral reason for God to create a world full of flourishing rational agents, since none would be wronged by God's not creating such a world. (By contrast, there may be requiring moral reasons for God not to create a world full of agents who live in misery, as they would have a moral right to complain against God for having created them.) Further, according to this variant of the morality framework, there is no other basis for holding that there is decisive moral reason for God to create. *Cf.* Murphy's treatment of related issues on p. 141.

distance from those who have badly mistreated them; that is an important way by which to uphold the moral status of victims, as well as honor the good things that have been neglected, victimized, damaged, lost, and destroyed. It follows that God, the unsurpassably good moral one, has reason to keep distance from human beings, per claim (c).

The alternative framework for divine action just sketched, we've argued, can handle claims (a)-(c). There are two respects in which we believe this alternative framework outperforms the holiness framework. First, it explains why holiness and sinfulness do not mix well. God's holiness, we're supposing, consists in God's unsurpassable moral excellence and lovingkindness. Human sinfulness largely consists in a twisted moral condition, elements of which we've enumerated just above. These two claims, when supplemented with the assumption that the morally good have reason to keep their distance from those who wrong them, explain why there is reason for God *in virtue of God's holiness* to keep God's distance. Nothing similar is true of the holiness framework. Under that framework, God is not holy in virtue of God's moral goodness or lovingkindness. Rather, God is holy solely in virtue of having non-normative qualities such as being omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and normative qualities such as being beautiful. So far that we can see, no such feature would explain why sin and holiness don't mix. To be sure, Murphy often writes as if they don't. But we do not see why, given the holiness framework. To explain why holiness and human sinfulness do not mix, the holiness framework would need supplementary claims that do not imply that God is necessarily morally good or loving. There may be such claims, but we're unsure what they would be.

Second, and relatedly, our alternative framework explains why paradigmatic experience of holiness often includes an element of both repulsion and attraction: agents often find themselves fittingly repulsed by the holy because they simultaneously discern God's moral goodness and the depths of their sinfulness. They find themselves fittingly drawn to the holy, desiring to be unified with it, because God's holiness is essentially constituted by God's moral goodness and lovingkindness. Since the latter is directed toward them, human agents and God can be unified in mutual love; the desire to be unified with God is not in vain. Let's add that these qualities would also explain apt reactions of awe and reverence. It is fitting to be in awe of and revere God's goodness and lovingkindness. So, the alternative framework is well-positioned to explain why agents are fittingly repulsed and attracted, as well as experience awe and reverence, in response to God *in virtue of God's holiness*.

We're skeptical of whether the holiness framework is situated to say anything similar. Imagine, for illustration's sake, you were to experience God's unsurpassable power, knowledge, and beauty—that in which God's holiness consists, according to the holiness framework. You would probably be overwhelmed, stunned, or cowed by experiencing these things. If we understand "repulsion" broadly enough, the holiness framework can probably explain why agents are fittingly repulsed by the holy in virtue of its being holy.

But we are unsure why it would be apt to desire to be unified with the holy. Experiencing God's unsurpassable power and knowledge would not explain it; there is nothing about these qualities that calls for desiring to be unified with a being who has them. Experiencing God's unsurpassable beauty might explain why such a desire would be apt, though that would depend on what this beauty is like. Austere and terrible beauty—the beauty of deep oceans and high alps—often galvanizes our attention. However, if something were to have such beauty, it is not obvious that it makes sense to desire to be unified with that thing in virtue of its having such beauty. So mere appeal to God's beauty would be insufficient to explain why it is fitting to desire to be unified with God. (For what it's worth, appealing to God's perfect rationality doesn't seem to fare any better. That an agent is perfectly rational does not make sense of why

an agent would want to be unified with it in virtue of its being this way.) If God's unsurpassable beauty were grounded in God's unsurpassable moral goodness and lovingkindness, as our alternative framework allows, then desiring to be unified with God in virtue of God's holiness would be both fitting and explicable. Yet this avenue is not available to the holiness framework. Perhaps there is some other avenue available. But the framework will again need to supplement itself—this time in order to explain why it is apt to desire to be unified with God in virtue of God's holiness.

To summarize, we've contended that the holiness framework is not well-positioned to substantiate the claims it employs to accommodate and explain (a)-(c). But there is an alternative framework for divine action, which incorporates God's unsurpassable moral goodness and lovingkindness, that handles these claims while not being subject to the concerns raised about the holiness framework. In addition, we've argued that this alternative framework makes sense of further claims, namely, why sin and holiness do not mix and why it would be fitting to respond to God with repulsion, attraction, reverence, and awe in virtue of God's holiness. The holiness framework does not, we've maintained, fare so well on these matters.

3.

It doesn't follow that the alternative framework we've sketched outperforms the holiness framework. But we think that there are additional steps that render this verdict likely. They include establishing that Murphy's case against the morality framework is considerably less powerful than it may appear. If we can secure this result, then we'll have accomplished a pair of objectives. We'll have removed the primary reasons for being suspicious of our alternative framework, which is a close relative to the morality framework, and have neutralized an important rationale for embracing the holiness framework.

Let's think of a morally perfect agent as one who *necessarily* is motivated by and flawlessly conforms to what is morally called for or required (82). As we understand it, Murphy's argument against the morality framework runs as follows:

(1) If God is morally perfect, then some moral requirements apply to God, ensuring strong reason for God to act.

(2) It's false that some moral requirements apply to God, ensuring strong reason for God to act.

So,

(3) God isn't morally perfect.

(4) The morality framework implies that God is morally perfect.

So,

(5) The morality framework is committed to false claims about God's character. As such, it should be rejected (86-98).

At first glance, the claim that God isn't morally perfect may seem to be in tension with Murphy's idea that God is flawlessly motivated by moral reasons (133-4). But any tension, Murphy contends, is only apparent. In Murphy's view, God *in fact* is flawlessly motivated by moral reasons, and yet moral requirements do not apply to God. The explanation is this: whatever moral reasons God acts in light of are merely justifying; they are not strong (in the sense of being decisive or requiring). But were moral requirements to apply to God, then they would ensure that God has strong moral reasons to act. Since God does not have such reasons, these requirements do not apply to God.

The justification for premise (2) draws most of Murphy's attention. The argument has two stages. In the first, Murphy argues that while moral requirements may ensure strong reasons to act, that is not because they themselves provide such reasons. Instead, a given action is morally required, ensuring strong reason to perform it, only if and because there are more basic reasons that favor performing that action (91).⁵ In the second stage, Murphy searches for what these more basic reasons might be for God but comes up empty-handed. It may be that prominent moral theories—whether Hobbesian, Humean, Aristotelian, or Kantian—identify the more basic reasons in light of which morally excellent *human beings* must act. But they do not identify the more basic reasons in light of which a morally perfect God would act (93). For example, if Hobbesian theories are correct, there is reason for human beings to conform to morality's directives because it is in their self-interest to do so. But God has no such reason to act morally.

There is a lot to wrestle with in the argument just articulated. Let's begin with the claim that moral requirements themselves do not provide reasons. Murphy attempts to support this claim by appealing to an argument developed by Jonathan Dancy. As Murphy reads Dancy, "the fact that an action is morally right (read: morally required) is not a reason to perform that action ... For if it were, then the judgment that the action is morally right would not have taken into account all of the relevant reasons that there are for or against the action" (89-90). Translated into the idiom of grounds, this line of reasoning states that

O: Any full ground of M , where M is a moral requirement for A to φ , must include all the relevant reasons for A to φ .

Now suppose, for argument's sake, that M were itself a reason for A to φ . Then M must be included in its own full grounds. But it can't be. So M cannot be a reason for A to φ (90-1).⁶

But claim O is false. It is true that a full ground of M must include what it takes for M to hold. But the fact that an action is required may have multiple full grounds. For example, M could be fully grounded in the fact

⁵ Murphy writes that what he says "takes for granted that the fact of moral rightness *is based on* more fundamental reasons. That an action is morally required of some agent is the case *only if* there are more basic reasons favoring the agent's performing the action" (91, italics ours).

⁶ Two points. First, our formulation of the argument simplifies Murphy's discussion in one respect. Murphy allows that moral requirements might be reasons but only in virtue of their "standing in" for more basic reasons (90-1). This complication will not affect our treatment of the argument. Second, this formulation of the argument amplifies Murphy's argument by making clear that a moral requirement M cannot be in its own full grounds and, so, cannot be a reason for acting as M directs. Without such a claim, we do not see how the argument would go through.

[God commanded A to φ]

and fully grounded in the fact

[A 's not φ ing would thereby involve treating another in a deeply unbecoming way].

Since O is false, it follows that the argument for holding that moral requirements do not themselves provide reasons does not withstand scrutiny.

The argument could be modified to accommodate the fact that a requirement can have multiple full grounds. So modified, the argument would appeal not to claim O but rather to

O^* : Every full ground of M must include relevant reasons sufficient for A to φ .

But note that O^* does not rule out the claim that M itself is reason for A to φ . For unlike O , O^* does not state or imply that all the relevant reasons for A to φ are included in M 's full grounds. Thus, as far as O^* goes, M could be an independent reason for A to φ that is not included in any full ground of M and, so, among the reasons in light of which a perfect moral agent acts.

So far we've focused on the first stage of Murphy's justification for premise (2), contending that it fails to establish that moral requirements do not themselves provide reason to act. We turn now to the second stage. Recall that, in this stage, Murphy surveys a range of normative ethical theories, such as Aristotelian, Hobbesian, and Kantian views, maintaining that they do not identify reasons for a morally perfect being to act. But for such an argument to work, the range of views under consideration would need to include a full sampling of the most promising contenders. The argument offered does not do that. Instead, it considers a fairly small inventory of theories and, in our judgment, does not canvass the most promising ones. The most promising theories presumably would be ones that have their home in the theistic tradition. None of the theories Murphy considers is of this sort.

As an example of a promising theistic position, consider a view that grounds moral requirements and moral rights in the worth of human agents: it is because these agents have such considerable worth that they have rights to be treated (or not treated) in certain ways and others have obligations to treat them (or not treat them) in those ways. What grounds the worth that human agents enjoy? Advocates of such a view have multiple options available to them, but one is that the worth of human agents is grounded in a complex of factors, including that they are endowed with capacities constitutive of personhood.⁷ If such a view were correct, the fact that human agents have such worth would seem to be precisely the sort of thing that would necessarily provide strong moral reasons for God to treat them in certain ways and not others. For in conforming to moral requirements, God would thereby be fittingly orienting Godself to what has considerable worth—such worth being a way in which they image God. Now add two assumptions: first, God is essentially perfectly practically rational, as Murphy claims and, second, that perfect practical rationality consists in fittingly responding to reasons. It follows that there are views that both entail and can make sense of why God necessarily acts for reasons that ground moral requirements.⁸

⁷ The view we're sketching is developed by Wolterstorff (2008) and (2012, chs. 7 & 8).

⁸ Arguably, any view that grounds moral obligation in the considerable worth of agents, such as certain versions of Kantianism, can also avail themselves of something like the line of argument just offered.

In our discussion, we've identified the holiness framework with Murphy's view, objecting to it and presenting an alternative. But there may be a better way to characterize the dialectic that avoids this identification. The key is to mark a distinction between the holiness framework *as such* and particular ways of developing it. The holiness framework as such maintains that the divine perfections (whatever they are) ground God's holiness, while particular developments of the framework specify and explicate those perfections. Under this way of thinking of things, Murphy has developed one version of the holiness framework, while we have sketched another. Our development of the framework, unlike Murphy's, holds that the divine perfections include God's moral goodness and lovingkindness. A development of the framework that incorporates these perfections not only avoids the objections we've raised against Murphy's view, but also provides a unified and plausible account of divine action: God's action is explained by and manifests one quality, namely, God's holiness. Moreover, because holiness is grounded in and arguably unifies the divine perfections, it helps to make sense of why it is a focus of worship, being that in virtue of which it is fitting to reverently offer God praise, thanks, repentance, and adoration.

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