

God of Holy Love: Toward an Agapist Alternative to Mark Murphy's Holiness Framework for Divine Action

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ABSTRACT: In the exceptional book *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*, Mark Murphy defends what he calls the *holiness framework* for divine action. The purpose of our essay-response to Murphy's book is to consider an alternative framework for divine action, what we call the *agapist framework*. We argue that the latter framework is more probable than Murphy's holiness framework with respect to *select* theological desiderata.

Mark Murphy has examined God's relationship to morality and its implications for divine action more deeply and extensively than perhaps any other living philosopher. The fruit of this labor is on full display in Murphy's most recent book, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*. Here he aims to provide an account of God's holiness and to infer from this account what God must be like and what sorts of actions God would or would not perform. The result is plausibly the most significant philosophical-theological work on divine holiness since Rudolf Otto's landmark study *The Idea of the Holy*. Murphy's well-argued book succeeds in casting an expansive vision of God as a holy and mysterious being that has reasons for remaining supremely fixed on Himself but who nevertheless deigns to create, redeem, and even share the divine life with limited and sinful creatures. Such a vision of God promises to reframe a number of contemporary theological problems and largely to elude abiding objections to theism.

Divine Holiness and Divine Action is comprised of two main parts. Part I articulates a certain understanding of God's holiness from which we can infer various things about God's nature. In order to understand God's holiness, Murphy follows, in its broadest contours and with important modifications, Otto's basic account. Murphy contends that, fundamentally, holiness is exhibited in virtue of a status possessed by God, a status that makes it simultaneously desirable yet unfitting for all other beings to be in union with God. Moreover, Murphy argues that the God of Scripture ought to be conceived of as *absolutely* holy such that (a) it is impossible for there to be a rational creature for whom intimate union with God would not be supremely desirable, and (b) there will always be some level of intimate union with God for which that same creature is unfit. Part II of the book attempts to show how this conception of absolute holiness ought to inform our understanding of divine action. On this score, Murphy argues for what he terms the *holiness framework* (HFDA, hereafter).

HFDA trades on a distinction between two kinds of reasons for action: *requiring reasons* versus (merely) *justifying reasons*. A requiring reason is a reason that an agent *must*, on pain of

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irrationality, act upon, provided that she does not also possess additional adequate reasons to do something else. By contrast, a merely justifying reason is a reason an agent *may* rationally act upon, so long as she does not also possess sufficient reason to the contrary. It might be said that requiring reasons provide rational *constraints* on action, whereas justifying reasons provide *opportunities* for rational action (Murphy 2021, 132-135). According to Murphy's HFDA, God has requiring reasons to respond to His own perfection by refraining from entering into various kinds of relationship with limited beings (i.e., creatures). The greater the limitations of the beings at issue and the more intimate the candidate relationship, the stronger God's requiring reasons are for refraining from entering into the relevant kind of relationship. Yet God still has reasons to act for our benefit and enter into various kinds of intimate relationship with us, which Murphy calls *reasons of love* (2021, 133). However, these reasons of love are only ever justifying reasons and therefore in no way necessitate divine action. So, God's reasons of love never by themselves provide God with requiring reasons to advance human welfare, alleviate human suffering, or seek various kinds of union with humans.

The purpose of our essay-response to Murphy's book is to consider an alternative framework for divine action, what we call the *agapist framework* (AFDA, hereafter). We argue that AFDA is more probable than Murphy's HFDA with respect to *select* theological desiderata. The goal is to take steps toward the assessment of the overall comparative probability of Murphy's HFDA rather than focus on some affiliated micro issue. As a result, our case for AFDA will need to be brief, partial, and rely on contentious premises. Nevertheless, we believe that the case highlights some of the considerations that might lead one rationally to resist Murphy's HFDA, and we hope that it will fruitfully advance the discussion of frameworks for divine action.

1. Adjudicating Between Frameworks for Divine Action

In Murphy's usage, a framework for divine action is "a scheme by which divine action can be explained and predicted, and which applies to the divine being simply because that being is divine" (2021, 81). Such a scheme concerns what God *qua* God would be motivated to do, at least as a kind of default setting, and hence aims to render intelligible some facet of a motivational structure that God necessarily has. Murphy notes that frameworks for divine action feature prominently, if sometimes only implicitly, in arguments for or against God's existence, and he illustrates various ways in which these frameworks animate theological judgements.

Frameworks for divine action are far-reaching theories, or hypotheses, about what God would be motivated to do, especially *ad extra*. Two types of evidential support are particularly relevant for adjudicating between wide-reaching theories.

First, there is a given theory's *prior probability*. This is the theory's probability given all tautological information contained within the theory and an assessment of how it compares to other theories prior to considering the particular data that the relevant theories are supposed to explain. A theory's prior probability, moreover, is determined by relevant background knowledge, explanatory scope, simplicity/parsimony,¹ and (as argued in Poston 2020) few, if any, unexplained contingencies or mysterious limitations (cf. Swinburne 2004, 67-68).

¹ A theory is, very roughly, simpler or more parsimonious if it postulates fewer types (or tokens) of substances and/or properties.

Second, there is a framework's *explanatory power*. As Richard Swinburne notes (2004, 56), "A theory has explanatory power in so far as it entails or makes probable the occurrence of many diverse phenomena that are observed to occur, and the occurrence of which is not otherwise to be expected." Perhaps a simpler way to think about explanatory power, then, is to home in on this notion of the comparative *expectedness* of some phenomenon. We might say, for instance, that a given theory, T_1 , has greater explanatory power than some alternative theory, T_2 , whenever some observed phenomenon would be *more* expected on T_1 than on T_2 .

One way to assess HFDA is by comparing its prior probability and explanatory power to alternative frameworks for divine action. Indeed, Murphy appears to argue this way. For he seems to contend that alternatives to HFDA have exceedingly low prior probabilities, unlike HFDA (Murphy 2021, 79-125), while HFDA's own explanatory power is sufficiently high to render it more probable on the whole than those same alternative frameworks (e.g., Murphy 2021, 125-256). Regardless, we assess HFDA along the indicated two lines in what follows. To do so, we sketch an alternative framework for divine action, AFDA, and suggest ways in which it might be thought to have advantages (as well as some disadvantages) in relation to Murphy's HFDA.

2. The Agapist Framework for Divine Action

As indicated, HFDA is a deliberative framework in which God's perfection gives God requiring reasons to keep His distance from creatures. The more limited the creature and the more significant the candidate kind of intimacy, the greater the strength of God's requiring reasons to keep His distance. On this view, then, our ability to explain and predict divine action is both enabled and constrained by such requiring reasons.

Behind this framework rests the conviction that God has *reasons of status* not to engage with creatures. God's absolute perfection—which "God loves, enjoys, and delights in" (Murphy 2021, 125)—puts God in a league of His own, thereby giving God requiring reason not to enter into intimate relationships with creatures that are "deficient, defective, and imperfect" (Ibid). God, in other words, recognizes the intrinsic beauty of the divine nature, realizes that He belongs in a class of His own, and is motivated by reasons concerning the objective misfit that comes with creatures being intimately united to Him. Yet, as discussed, God has reasons of love, which are justifying reasons, to act for the sake of creatures.

For present purposes, we grant, in basic keeping with Murphy, that God has requiring reasons of holiness not to enter intimate kinds of relationships with creatures. Nevertheless, we wish to deny that granting this basic idea about divine holiness has many of the implications for divine action indicated by Murphy. To do this, we assimilate *some* of the features of HFDA into AFDA.

AFDA is similar to HFDA insofar as it posits the existence of both reasons of holiness and reasons of love, but it differs insofar as it takes God's reasons of love to be both fundamental and requiring. AFDA begins with a God that loves Godself. But more specifically, AFDA emphasizes that God exists in a Trinity, where each of the persons reach out to one another in delighted love.² The love here is maximal, as Murphy would agree (2021, 98); it's simply impossible for there to be a more valuable kind of love than that which exists within the Trinity. As a supremely loving being, moreover, God is motivated by love to create

² Murphy (2021, 98) notes these points as well, but what he infers from this is different from AFDA as outlined above.

and engage that which He makes. Additionally (and this is where Murphy would disagree), because God is such a loving being, God has requiring reasons—for either all creatures or some particularly valuable subset of them (e.g., persons)—to act in accordance with their value by promoting and protecting their flourishing, advancing union with them, and the like. The greater the intrinsic value of the (relevant) creature at issue (or, better, the relevant *kind* of creature at issue), the stronger the requiring reasons are to act in loving ways toward the creature.³ On this perspective, our ability to explain and predict divine action is both enabled and internally constrained by God’s being loving toward creatures who possess various grades of intrinsic value that merit various depths of loving treatment from God. Yet God is also absolutely holy, understood along the lines of Murphy’s Otto-inspired account of holiness. God is absolutely holy, according to the proponent of AFDA, because God’s legitimate self-love motivates God to avoid relationships that don’t befit His tremendous worth. So, on account of God’s love, God has *reasons of holiness* not to enter into various kinds of intimate relationships with limited beings; the greater the limitations of the beings at issue and the more intimate the candidate relationship, the stronger God’s reasons are for refraining from entering into the relevant kind of relationship. Thus, when AFDA posits the existence of requiring reasons of holiness, it also emphasizes that such reasons of holiness are grounded in divine self-love. That is, reasons of holiness are, at bottom, reasons of love that direct and constrain divine action.⁴

AFDA rests upon two claims regarding value that Murphy expressly denies. The first claim is that creatures have intrinsic value. Murphy contends that this is impossible given theistic commitments (2017, 75-82; 2018; 2021, 94-95). The second claim that Murphy (2017, 60-62; 2021, 93-94) denies is that creaturely intrinsic value would provide God with *requiring* reasons of love (i.e., requiring reasons to promote creaturely flourishing, union with them, and so on), even if such value is enjoyed by some creatures. We see things differently.

We think there is cause to maintain that creatures are intrinsically valuable. Daniel Rubio (Forthcoming; cf. Kemp 2022) has argued the case against Murphy in detail, and plausibly to our minds. Here we have nothing to add to that case, but we invite interested readers to consult this essay. In what follows, then, we suppose there are sufficient grounds to maintain that creatures possess intrinsic value (of various grades).

Even if Murphy were to allow that creatures have intrinsic value, would God have requiring reasons of love? Murphy has his doubts, and a central worry seems to be this. There is a tremendous gap between God’s value and creaturely value, whether the latter is intrinsic or not. The gap is simply too wide to ground any confidence that creaturely value would give God requiring reasons of love as opposed to only justifying reasons of this kind.

We agree with Murphy that the value gap between creatures and God is overwhelming. Still, we question whether this by itself should cause one to doubt that God has the relevant requiring reasons. Before we can get to that, though, consider a few ground-clearing comments.

Establishing whether God has either justifying or requiring reasons is a difficult task. For his part, Murphy does not demonstrate (in any strong sense) that God has only justifying

³ Here we might say that God loves each creature to its highest, most objectively fitting degree but not that God loves each creature maximally. For more on such a view, see (Wessling 2020, 150-163).

⁴ AFDA could be seen as either a species of the love framework or as a way of providing content to the morality framework (see Murphy 2021, 79-108, for explanation). Murphy has indicated that a framework close to AFDA defended in (Wessling 2020) is a species of the morality framework and faces similar challenges he presses against that framework (Murphy 2021, 99). However one wishes to categorize AFDA, our aim is to show that it constitutes a viable alternative to Murphy’s HFDA.

reasons of love. Rather, he in effect proposes that the hypothesis that God has these kinds of reasons seems to fit well with the value gap between God and creatures, and that such reasons, when couched within HFDA, provide that framework with an escape from the prior improbabilities of rival frameworks and imbue it with more explanatory power than its rivals. We wish to do something similar on behalf of the claim that God has requiring reasons of love in this section and the next. In this section, the modest claim is that the notion that God has requiring reasons of love for at least some of His creatures is, given some background theological knowledge,⁵ at least as plausible as its denial.

With that proviso in place, consider two more. First, and as noted already, Murphy affirms that God is maximally loving; this is a feature of God's intra-trinitarian life. We share this conviction with Murphy. We also agree with Murphy's observation that how much justifying force a reason has for an agent often concerns the character or features of the agent at issue (2021, 157). However, we add that it's plausible that whether a reason counts as a *requiring* reason for an agent sometimes depends upon the character or features of the relevant agent. For example, in many cases one's relation to one's child places requiring reasons on her parents that are not similarly placed upon others. Most obviously, parents might have requiring reasons to see to it that their child is fed and nurtured daily. Similarly, it is plausible to suppose that one's interests and goals provide one with requiring reasons. The individual who has the goal of being a lawyer, for instance, has a requiring reason to take the bar exam.⁶ Given these two suppositions (i.e., that the triune God is maximally loving plus the proposal that requiring reasons can be agent-relative), our claim shall be that it is plausible (or, minimally, not implausible) to suppose that God, as a maximally loving being, is so construed that the intrinsic value of some or all of the beings God creates provides Him with requiring reasons of love.

Now return to the value gap between God and creatures. On Murphy's view, God recognizes that creaturely value greatly pales in comparison with His own value, and so God doesn't have requiring reasons of love regarding them. On our view, this is the wrong lesson to infer from the value gap.⁷

An alternative takeaway from the value gap between God and creatures is this: perhaps God is not terribly concerned whether some creature is sufficiently close to God in value.⁸ Maybe God, in virtue of being maximally loving, is so predisposed to love anything and everything to the highest fitting degree that an entity's intrinsic value generates for God requiring reasons of various strengths corresponding to the relevant entity's level of intrinsic worth. Or maybe God is necessarily predisposed to love that which has *sufficient* intrinsic value, even if that value in no way approximates God's value, and this intrinsic value generates requiring reasons for Him similar to the way that children can generate requiring reasons for their parents. Of course, we don't typically love so extravagantly and expansively. But we have limited resources and capacities for love, limits not shared by God, that might explain this difference.

Another way to think about this is to consider whether love can be plausibly depicted as *comparative* for God. Suppose, for instance, that God is deliberating about whether He wants to love one of His creatures and that a central consideration involved in this choice concerns

⁵ Here background knowledge roughly refers to widely affirmed theological concepts that are not integral to distinguishing HFDA and AFDA nor factor into the case for the explanatory power of either of these frameworks.

⁶ Gert (2003) gives the example of having a requiring reason to get to the airport for an important flight.

⁷ Or perhaps we should say, this *is not clearly the right* lesson to infer from the value gap.

⁸ Indeed, being disposed *not* to make such comparisons to oneself is plausibly a manifestation of humility, something that we and Murphy agree characterizes God.

the degree to which the value of that being approximates His own value. After a time, God decides to love this creature simply or primarily because it transcends the value of other creatures and thereby is the closest (merely by contrast) to His own value. Such a love is *comparative* since it proceeds only or primarily with the comparison between God (or values more generally) and the creature in mind. But, plausibly, *ideal love is not comparative in this way*.

Robert Adams makes an elegant case against comparative accounts of love (Adams 1999, 151-7, 161-170, 187-192). He argues that love is concerned with particular individuals and that there is something inapt about love justified or based upon how well our loved ones measure up against higher and more general values. There would be something lacking in someone's love, for example, were he to love his spouse primarily because she is a particularly fine representative of transcendent beauty (or worse, because she is more attractive than the other available women) and to love his children primarily because they are more gifted than other children. No, what ought to be more relevant to the justification of this individual's love is what he celebrates as intrinsic to his spouse and children and (we add) what special relations he bears to them. Sure, possessing a sufficient amount of value might be a necessary condition to warrant an individual's love. But that is different from saying that one ought to love another simply or primarily because she measures well against the backdrop of more general values that are of concern.

If Adams is right that ideal love is noncomparative in the way suggested, God's love too will be noncomparative.⁹ But if so, then it's not a stretch to think that the extreme value that separates creatures from God is largely irrelevant to the justification of God's love of some creature. For if love is noncomparative, then God's reasons of love would not be constricted by a comparison between His own value and the value of His beloved. What would matter more, it seems, is the intrinsic value of the relevant creature (considered in itself), whether it possesses features in which God might delight, and what positive relations it bears to God. Or to put it yet another way, if these considerations are what are crucial for justifying God's love of creatures, it's hard to see why the value *gap* between God and creatures would be relevant *per se* to whether God's reasons of love are justifying or requiring. Rather, to locate clues about whether God's reasons of love are either justifying or requiring, it seems better to look at the character or features of the one who loves (in this case God), the features of the candidate of love (in this case some or all creatures), and the relations that obtain between the relevant parties (i.e., between God and creatures).

When one looks to the character of God, one finds a being that is maximally loving. While we don't know much about God's inner-life, it's plausible that the persons of the Trinity revel in sharing other-directed love with one another (cf. Jn. 17:1-26). Supposing this is so, it would not be terribly surprising to learn that God is naturally predisposed to love creatures (should there be any), most especially those of the kind that can give and receive love. This may very well be just what God is necessarily like. After all, if some or all creatures necessarily resemble the beauty of the divine nature in some way, especially in their capacity to love, and God loves that beauty, then this plausibly gives God compelling reason to love each creature which is the locus or carrier of that beauty (i.e., each creature that has intrinsic, although reflective, value). The claim would not be that God loves some or all creatures *because*, and to the degree that, they are particularly impressive representatives of transcendent divine beauty. Rather, the claim would be that the reasons (or some subset thereof) that make love of the divine nature fitting would transfer to love of those creatures that are bearers of some facet of that beauty (cf.

⁹ It's worth stating explicitly (what is implicit above) that Murphy, if we understand his views correctly, would reject the noncomparative claims about divine love above.

Adams 1999, 177-198; although see Murphy 2021, 95).¹⁰ Finally, when one loves another deeply (which God may well do in the case of creatures), she regularly finds herself with requiring reasons of love; such reasons typically are integral to the manner in which she is linked or committed to the object of her affection (although see Ebels-Duggan 2008).

With these considerations in the backdrop, which of the following two propositions appears more intrinsically plausible?

(A) If God creates, God necessarily has only justifying reasons of love (of various weights) regarding intrinsically valuable creatures,

or

(B) If God creates, God necessarily has requiring reasons of love (of various weights) regarding either certain types of intrinsically valuable creatures (e.g., rational creatures such as humans) or all intrinsically valuable creatures.

We suspect that many will be inclined to select either (B) or not know which proposition is more plausible. To select option (B) counts strongly in favor of the idea that God's reasons of love are requiring reasons on account of the intrinsic value of creatures. Alternatively, suppose one thinks it's unknown which proposition is more intrinsically plausible. We would take this to provide indirect evidence for the driving contention of this section: given some background theological knowledge, it's at least as plausible as its denial to suppose that God has requiring reasons of love for some creatures.

Here's another attempt to bolster the plausibility of (B). This time the scope is limited to humans, but the considerations would likely apply to other personal creatures as well (e.g., angels).

First, Christians have long thought that humans are sacred or otherwise enjoy tremendous worth. Since the time of Immanuel Kant, it has become customary to refer to this worth as *dignity*. Precisely what this worth is and what accounts for it remains contentious. Yet Kant drew an influential distinction between dignity and price. If a thing has price, "something else can be put in its place as an equivalent". However, if a thing "is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity" (Kant 1958, 77). Without trying to give an exhaustive account, consider just one feature of this priceless dignity that humans might be thought to enjoy.

Ronald Dworkin compares humans to works of art (1993, 68-101). Part of what factors into this designation is the idea that humans are engaged in self-creation through a history of free choices.¹¹ Unlike any other terrestrial creature of which we are aware, a human's perspective, values, and patterns of action are not the mere product of nature, nurture, and circumstance. No, humans alone can, in part, rise above their influences and even their individual make-ups to have a hand in crafting their characters (or so we would argue). This, it seems, is an extraordinarily valuable capacity that distinguishes humans from other creatures. It would also seem to make them unique from each other. It's highly unlikely, for instance,

¹⁰ The last few sentences aim to make clear that the noncomparative nature of love is not violated here. God is not loving *because* of how creatures stand up to (or reflect) divine beauty. God loves because the same reasons that motivate love of divine beauty *also* motivate love of creatures.

¹¹ The emphasis on *free* choices is ours, although it seems to be implicit in Dworkin's account (cf. Dworkin 1993, 83), even if Dworkin would analyze this freedom differently than we do here.

that two humans would craft themselves in precisely the same way, and more unlikely still that they would do so via qualitatively identical histories (which would seem to matter for the value of the life lived or crafted). And even if such a case were to occur, the qualitative sameness would typically be unstable, so long as the individuals remain free to ascent or refine themselves further. Crucially, though, our proposal is that this capacity for partial self-authorship factors into the high value and uniqueness of humans. The deliverances of this capacity are of distinct value.

It would also seem that the human capacity for partial self-authorship would render humans unique to God. For such creatures would have a certain independence from God insofar as who they become is not the assured result of God's direct and indirect creative processes. This is not to say that God cannot make humans that freely forge themselves to be indistinguishable duplicates of each other. But to achieve this would seem to require God to create an enormously large quantity of individuals or else pluck these duplicates out of a vast logical space (say, if something like Molinism is true). In our view this indicates that humans are remarkable beings vis-à-vis God's creative activity. They are, we might say, *non-duplicable*—even if, strictly speaking, God can create humans that begin and freely remain qualitative duplicates. However, to suppose that humans are non-duplicable is no threat to God's majesty. For as C.S. Lewis reminds us, any good that is a product of a human's free choice is but a dim reflection of the multifaceted divine personality (see Lewis 1980, 218-227).

Not only has God created humans to be non-duplicable, God also arguably bears a special relation to humans which Murphy overlooks. Murphy (2017, 32-34; 2021, 100) maintains that the only relation that God necessarily bears to creatures—should there be any—that might factor into God's love of them is *being the creator of* these beings. But this seems mistaken. Arguably, it's essential to humans that their *summum bonum* is found in being properly related to God in love and that it's impossible for humans to have rich and lasting flourishing without such a relationship (at least given the way God has chosen to construct reality). If so, it seems that, should there be humans, God necessarily stands to humans in the relation of *being the sole individual to which being in a loving relationship is essential for rich, lasting flourishing*. One might say that such a relation is significant because it morally binds God to humans such that He has requiring reasons to promote their union with Him and remove setbacks to this union. The thought might be that it would be wrong of God to create beings made for relationship with Himself—a relationship fundamental to their flourishing—and yet not do what would be sufficient for bringing about this divine-human union, should humans choose to cooperate. But to go in this direction, one would likely need to rebut Murphy's arguments (2017, 45-66; 2021, 84-98) that God is not bound by moral norms. An alternative strategy is to say that this relation demonstrates that God has especially fitted humans for a love relationship with Himself (cf. Parker 2022), and since God has purposefully made humans in this way, the God who loves to love is motivated to love them and act accordingly.

Suppose, then, that God has created humans as non-duplicable and that they necessarily stand in the noted relation to God, should God decide to create them in these ways. If so, then it seems that God has created tremendously valuable creatures that are teleologically oriented for a kind of loving union with Himself, a union that is essential for their rich and lasting flourishing. Plus, it may well be that God is naturally predisposed to love; this is what constitutes the intra-trinitarian relationship, and, because God is a loving being, God is inclined to love creatures to the highest fitting degree. Given these considerations (and not yet moving to the explanatory power of the relevant frameworks), does not something very much like (B) seem at least as plausible as something very much like (A), if not more so? Although

opinions are sure to divide, we are inclined to answer this question affirmatively, and our sense is that many others would agree.

But before we can confidently rest on this claim, there is a significant matter to address. It could be argued that AFDA presupposes that God is constrained (for want of a better word) by moral norms. However, we've mentioned that Murphy argues that God isn't so constrained. Some response to such argumentation is in order.

Murphy maintains (2021, 89-91) that a fundamental issue in determining whether God is bound by moral norms concerns the location of reasons that God, as an absolutely perfect being, must have to promote and prevent setbacks to the welfare of creatures. However, Murphy underscores that there is a logical gap between *some action's furthering or protecting someone else's welfare* and *one's having good reason to perform that action which furthers or protects that person's welfare*. Philosophers have long noticed this gap and have proposed various explanatory theories as to why humans generally should tend to the welfare of others. Such theories include Hobbesian, Humean, Aristotelian, and Kantian accounts. Importantly, though, none of these accounts, even if successful in shedding light on human moral requirements, gives us good reason to think that God would similarly have motivating reason to tend to the welfare of creatures. Quite the contrary, "If any of these views is the correct account of how others' good provides one of us reasons for action, then we thereby have a powerful basis for *denying* that an absolutely perfect being must have decisive reason to promote and protect the well-being of us creatures" (Murphy 2021, 93).

Our response is intended merely to weaken the force of Murphy's contention. Let's agree that none of the accounts discussed by Murphy provides us with grounds for supposing that God has requiring reasons to promote and protect the well-being of creatures. Nevertheless, we deny that this concession provides us with a powerful basis for denying that God must have the relevant requiring reasons related to creaturely well-being.¹² The explanation for this is simple: God and creatures may have different kinds of reasons (requiring or otherwise) to perform approximately the same types of actions. After all, the idea of an individual having a number of independent requiring reasons to act is not terribly mysterious (say, that it contributes to her own flourishing, that God has commanded it, that her role as parent requires it, or that she would be liable to criminal charges should she not perform the relevant action). Given that we are well-acquainted with there being many different reasons to perform a given action-type, we do not see (contra Murphy 2021, 85) that the supposition that *the reasons humans have for moral action do not apply to God* should give us strong grounds to doubt that God might have His own reasons for moral action (or that which is analogous thereto). On the contrary, throughout this section we have been circling around the conclusion that, for all we know, there is a kind of fit between God's loving character and creatures that provides God with requiring reasons to promote and protect some creaturely well-being or flourishing (specifically that of humans). As discussed, God may be perfectly attentive to all creaturely values and, because of His love and limitless resources, be necessarily inclined to promote and protect the flourishing of at least those non-duplicable creatures that He has made for loving union with Himself.¹³

¹² Murphy's explanation for denying that God has requiring reasons to promote creaturely goodness/well-being are bound up with further considerations about the participatory (and non-intrinsic) nature of creaturely goodness. Moreover, Murphy admits that his defense of the merely justifying nature of such reasons for God stops at demonstrating its coherence rather than ruling out the position we suggest here: namely, that such reasons are requiring for an Anselmian being (cf. Murphy 2017, 74).

¹³ It's worth mentioning that there are accounts of why humans should generally attend to the welfare of others that would apparently apply to God as well. Consider, for example, Christine Swanton's *Target-Centred Virtue*

But even if all parties decide to agree that God has requiring reasons of love, there remains a final issue regarding AFDA that demands attention. We have said that God's reasons of holiness are grounded in God's reasons of self-love. But insofar as God's reasons of love are calibrated by the value or dignity of the beloved, then it would seem as if God's self-directed reasons of love would have an unsurpassable degree of strength that entirely outweighs God's creature-directed reasons of love. In other words, on our accounting of AFDA, one might worry that the reasons of holiness to keep distance from creatures that are grounded in reasons of divine self-love would always, or usually, greatly outweigh God's creature-directed reasons of love (to promote their welfare, seek union with them, and so on). This might be thought to be so for the simple reason that God's value far surpasses the value of any creature along with the thought that the strength of God's reasons should be regulated by the value of the being at issue. Yet we deny that God's reasons of holiness would regularly outweigh God's creature-directed reasons of love in the manner indicated. Why?

To keep things brief, we maintain that it's plausible to suppose that God has different kinds of reasons of holiness. Based upon the ontological chasm that exists between God and creatures, Murphy (2021, 49) states that "for every possible creature and every relevant context of intimate relationship, there is a point at which that creature is not fit to be in that relationship with God." This seems basically right. Yet there is a difference between some relationship being (merely) *incongruous* for God to allow versus it being *improper* to allow.

Let's agree that an improper relationship is one that isn't just awkward and ill-fitted in relation to God's value but one that acts as an affront to God's worth. It's something that is not merely beneath God but opposed to God in some way. Such relationships are plausibly thought to correspond to God having strong requiring reasons of holiness (i.e., self-love) not to allow. The greater the degree of impropriety of the candidate relationship, the stronger God's reasons are for refraining from entering the relevant kind of relationship. So, God has strong requiring reasons of holiness (perhaps even decisive reasons), for instance, not to be related intimately to humans who curse God and perpetually sin against Him.

By contrast, let's agree that an incongruous relationship is awkward and ill-fitted but not an affront to God's worth. These relationships might be said to correspond to God's having requiring reasons of holiness of considerably less strength to avoid them. The more the candidate relationship is simply awkward and ill-fitted rather than an affront to God's worth

Ethics (2021). According to this perspective, virtues are determined by the manner in which traits of character hit their targets (e.g., value, status, bond, or an individual's good), and actions are similarly to be evaluated in terms of how well they hit the targets of the relevant affiliated virtues. Presupposed by this non-eudaimonistic form of virtue ethics is the idea that there is an objective fit between virtues, right action, and their targets (cf. Cullity 2018). Might there be an objective fit between God's love and the creaturely targets of that love that would generate requiring reasons for God? It's difficult to say. But if God's love is analogous to our love, then the assumption would seem to be that the answer is yes. That is not the main point, though. Rather, the main point is that there are independently motivated accounts of why humans have the norms they apparently do to attend to the welfare of others that would seem to apply to God with only slight alteration. So, whether God should be thought to be subject to analogous norms will likely turn on a raft of considerations apart from whether certain leading theories of accounting for these norms in the human sphere appears to preclude application to God. Indeed, Christians who are convinced that God is a moral being (or analogous thereto)—say, from their reading of Scripture or from certain facets of the Christian tradition—are likely to avail themselves of ways of making sense of morality that include God in one way or another. Regardless, our aim has been to offer considerations on behalf of the idea that God might very well be subject to norms related to love that are analogous to those that impinge upon human conduct. And we do not see that the moral gap that Murphy underscores should tip the evidential scales greatly against the notion that God has requiring reasons of love.

(i.e., improper), the weaker God's requiring reasons for refraining from entering into the relevant kind of relationship.

We submit that relationships that fulfill, or are closely related to, what creatures were created for might be incongruous in certain respects but not improper. For instance, Christians maintain that God created humans for a kind of intimate union with Himself. The instantiation of this relationship (and, we might add, the appropriate path toward its consummation) might be checkered with moments and features that can only be described as awkward and mismatched. Nevertheless, given God's creative purposes, we doubt that these relationships should be categorized as essentially improper. And because they are not improper, God's requiring reasons of holiness to avoid them will not typically be very weighty.

This distinction between incongruous and improper divine-creature relationships may be applied to AFDA as follows. While God has requiring reasons of love to advance the flourishing of creatures, their union with Himself and the like, He also has requiring reasons of holiness not to enter both incongruous and improper relationships with creatures, the latter of which are typically stronger than the former. Does this mean that God regularly has conflicting requiring reasons regarding creatures with approximately equal weight, or that God's requiring reasons typically favor God refraining from entering intimate relationships with creatures? Although we leave the door open to the possibility of such conflicts or weighting of reasons on some occasions, we maintain that God's *human*-directed reasons of love will typically outweigh God's reasons of holiness to keep His distance. For the requiring reasons of love that are generated with beings that were created for union with God (as humans apparently have been) plausibly give God strong requiring reasons for dealing with *them, qua* beings who were created for intimate union with Himself, in ways that advance this end, whatever infelicitous incongruities might be affiliated therewith. This is in contrast to the strong requiring reasons that are brought about by relationships for which it would be improper for God to allow. Importantly, though, the impropriety of such relationships is not grounded by how creatures were originally intended by God to be, but, rather, by certain misbehaviors or vices they have come to exhibit that are (at least often) correctable. So, while God might have strong (and maybe even decisive) requiring reasons not to relate intimately to creatures in these improper conditions, God will also have strong requiring reasons of love to have these prohibiting conditions removed, when possible, so that His purposes for them can be fulfilled. Indeed, we submit that these divine requiring reasons of love will typically be much weightier than God's reasons of holiness to keep His distance insofar as the improper relationships that God has strong reason to avoid are explained by features of the creaturely agent that are redeemable or removable. It might even be that God has strong reasons of holiness (which are grounded in divine self-love) to fulfill the God-given purposes of creatures if we think that it would be improper for God to be related forever to a creation that does not reach the goals that God has set for it. If so, God would have both weighty (self-regarding) requiring reasons of holiness along with weighty (creature-directed) requiring reasons of love to fulfill, or attempt to fulfill, the teleological orientations of some or all creatures. But in either case, the weight of God's requiring reasons will typically favor God acting in ways that align with creature-directed, specifically human-directed, reasons of love. In the remainder of this essay, we utilize this distinction between incongruous and improper relationships, and the affiliated strengths of requiring reasons, on behalf of AFDA when it's appropriate to do so.

We hope we have given some basis for supposing that the prior probability of AFDA is non-negligible. We here add that the framework is parsimonious (e.g., both reasons of love and holiness are ultimately explained by divine love), has few if any unexplained contingencies or mysterious limitations, and has an intended explanatory scope that mirrors HFDA. Whether

AFDA's prior probability is as high as HFDA's is an issue that we cannot discuss presently. Instead, we will need to help ourselves to the rather large assumption that AFDA and HFDA share approximately the same prior probability. With that assumption in the background, let's turn to the question of whether AFDA is overall more probable than its competitor with respect to select theological data.

3. The Explanatory Power of the Agapist Framework

When it comes to the explanatory power of AFDA in relation to HFDA, we might consider two kinds of data: the theological and the philosophical. Although this division of categories is fairly stipulative, the former category concerns the explanation of data derived from authoritative sources from within the Christian tradition, such as scriptural themes and Christian teachings about creation, Incarnation, redemption, and the like. By contrast, the philosophical category concerns the explanation of data derived from general observation, experience, and reason without the use of standard authoritative Christian or other religious sources. The arguments from evil and divine hiddenness are the two subjects discussed by Murphy in *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* that fall within this latter category. However, the bulk of the topics discussed by Murphy in this monograph fall within the former, theological category. Our contention is that AFDA is more probable than HFDA with respect to the theological data discussed by Murphy and that which is adjacent thereto. We here leave aside the topics discussed by Murphy within the philosophical category.

Before we present our case, two important assumptions merit emphasis. First, we assume that if God has a requiring reason to perform some action, this predisposes God to perform that action and thereby *predicts* it to some degree. Moreover, we assume that the *stronger* the relevant requiring reasons are, the better they allow us to predict that God will perform the corresponding action. We understand Murphy to be using HFDA in this way, even if he doesn't put it in exactly those terms (cf. Murphy 2021, 75-77, 79-84, 110-111, 125, 157).¹⁴ So, in what follows and in apparent step with Murphy, we adopt the mentioned assumptions between requiring reasons, their strengths, and the predictability of divine action.

We start the assessment of the explanatory power of the frameworks with scriptural themes. In Chapter 6 of his monograph, Murphy argues that HFDA accords with (i) scriptural declarations that God is absolutely holy, (ii) depictions of God appealing to His own holiness to explain His actions, especially in keeping distance from the unclean, defiled, and impure, and (iii) instances of God calling created persons to behave in certain ways which exemplify moralistic and ritualistic holiness.

We agree that there is consilience here. However, as Murphy knows (cf. Murphy 2021, 126 and 132), Scripture underdetermines which of the frameworks for divine action is true (if any). Unsurprisingly, nothing in Scripture strongly suggests that God has requiring reasons of holiness as opposed to justifying reasons, and there is arguably little biblical information from which we might infer that God's reasons of holiness generally correspond to some level of strength. To the degree that this is so, it seems that the proponent of AFDA, in which requiring reasons of holiness are integral, could naturally affirm the kinds of biblical themes highlighted by Murphy.

¹⁴ While the connection between requiring reasons, justifying reasons, and what one is inclined to do is less than perfectly clear (cf. Climenhaga 2020, 589), we take Murphy to be endorsing something like the connection we've expressed on the pages we've cited from Murphy in the above paragraph.

There is also cause to maintain that AFDA has an overall advantage over HFDA in accounting for certain biblical themes. First, there are apparent biblical teachings about divine love that parallel the kinds of biblical considerations cited by Murphy on behalf of HFDA. To begin with, Scripture indicates that God is incredibly, if not absolutely, loving. To cite just a few examples: love seems to characterize God's intra-trinitarian life (e.g., Jn. 17:20-26), God is identified with love in some special manner (1 Jn. 4:8, 16), Jesus seems to relate love to divine perfection (Matt. 5:43-48),¹⁵ and God's love, which surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:17-19), is said to be lavish and unfailing (e.g., Rom. 8:31-39; 1 Jn. 3:1; cf. Ps. 36:5-12). With this, there are well known biblical depictions of God appealing to His love to explain His actions (e.g., Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8; 1 Jn. 4:9-10) and to call humans to love as He loves in Christ (e.g., Jn. 15:9-13; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 Jn. 3:16, 4:7-11). An apparent advantage of AFDA is that it better predicts why God covenants with people and cares about humans recognizing God's holiness. It's because knowing God more deeply and drawing closer to Him appropriately are *good for* humans, and a loving God would act to bring about such benefits for those beloved (cf. Murphy 2021, 131-132 and Murphy 2017, 172-177). Given that AFDA affirms that God has strong requiring reasons of love regarding creatures, it is *less* surprising on AFDA than on HFDA that God would act in the ways He is depicted in these scriptural passages. This provides a slight edge to AFDA over HFDA in terms of explanatory power.

Of course, Murphy could push back. Perhaps he could underscore biblical descriptions of divine action that seem to be entirely unmotivated by reasons of love but cohere with reasons of holiness. God striking Uzzah dead for touching the Ark of the Covenant comes immediately to mind (2 Sam. 6:1-7) as do the commands attributed to God to kill every man, woman, and child of competitor peoples (1 Sam. 15:3). But the Christian tradition provides resources—allegory, hyperbole, or error—for dealing with such texts of which the proponent of AFDA will almost certainly need to make use.¹⁶ Regardless, these interpretative matters are extremely complicated, as Murphy knows. Hence, even though we think that AFDA has advantages over HFDA in predicting core scriptural themes, we presently suppose that the frameworks are at a draw in explaining bare biblical data. So, let's turn our attention to Christian doctrines.

In Chapter 7, Murphy argues that HFDA explains the contingency of creation excellently. The reason for this is that God's default setting, on HFDA, is not to create anything. For creating is necessarily the sort of action that is beneath God's status, as God would be directly present to all of creation as He sustains it in existence. This is an intimate kind of relationship that the holy God has strong requiring reason to avoid. But God, on Murphy's view, has justifying reasons of love to create.

Let's agree that God didn't have to create anything. The proponent of AFDA can account for this assumption by taking cues from Murphy and affirming that God's holiness (or self-directed love) provides God with reasons not to create. On the assumption that God's relating to creation would be incongruous but not improper (in the senses previously described), AFDA simply claims that these reasons are requiring reasons against creation. But God also has requiring reasons of love *to* create.

How would a proponent of AFDA determine what God's *default* action would be? Well, this depends on the strength of the different requiring reasons God has prior to creating anything. Proponents of AFDA might take the view that God's reasons to create are stronger than His reasons not to do so. (Such proponents of AFDA might take this view on account

¹⁵ Relevant here is (Wessling 2020, 200-203).

¹⁶ E.g., see (Rausser 2021) for a recent insightful, even if popular-level, discussion of these resources (cf. Bergmann, Murray, and Rea 2011).

of the tremendous strength of God's love coupled with the idea that incongruous relationships with creatures only provide God with requiring reasons of relatively weak strength to avoid them.) If so, then the fact that God did create would confirm AFDA over HFDA. However, proponents of AFDA might prefer to treat God's requiring reasons to create and to refrain from creating to be counterbalanced prior to creation. (Perhaps the idea would be that God's reasons of love are stronger when they concern existing objects, which is not the case with creatures prior to creating, and that God's creature-directed reasons of love, prior to creation, share a strength that is approximately equal to His reasons to avoid incongruous relationships with creatures, especially when God knows that many such relationships will soon become improper in certain respects.) On a view such as this, there would be no default in God, for His requiring reasons would not favor either action—i.e., creation or non-creation—over the other. Even so, the fact that God did create would confirm this version of AFDA over HFDA as well, for God would be acting *contrary* to HFDA's expectations (Murphy 2021, 137-145) but not contrary to (this version of) AFDA's expectations.

However one understands the strength of God's various requiring reasons regarding creation on AFDA (and we hereby refrain from committing to one or the other), creation is contingent and its existence then supports AFDA over HFDA.¹⁷

What's more, biblical scholars argue that Scripture depicts God as fashioning creation as a kind of cosmic temple in which He will indwell. We arguably see this temple motif within the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:4 (see, e.g., Levenson 1984; Middleton 2005; Walton 2011). However, various New Testament passages (e.g., Rom. 8:18-25, 1 Cor. 15:23-28, and in Rev. 21-22) seem to indicate that God will one day dwell within all of creation akin to the manner in which God previously dwelt within the Holy of Holies (e.g., Beale 2014; Middleton 2014; Wright 2019, 261-268). Obviously, this is a deeply intimate way of relating to creation that surpasses mere omnipresence. We suggest that such a purpose for creation is better predicted by AFDA than it is by HFDA. For, on the latter, God's default setting vis-à-vis creation is to refrain from being related to it, and the more intimate the posited relation, the stronger HFDA's resistance to it. And the stronger HFDA's resistance, the worse it predicts scripture's cosmic temple motif, resulting in further confirmation of AFDA over HFDA.

Next, consider the Incarnation. In Chapter 8, Murphy argues that the Incarnation is utterly surprising and normatively weird, and that HFDA provides a good explanation of this fact. Two features of HFDA illuminate why this is so: "first, the overwhelming strength of the requiring reasons that God has against assuming a human nature, and second, that the reasons of love on which God is acting are justifying only and deeply disproportionate to the reasons of absolute holiness" (Murphy 2021, 169). So, "we should expect that such a [holy] God would refrain from becoming incarnate" (Ibid.). In this same chapter Murphy also presents an innovative argument for the conclusion that HFDA accounts for Christ's impeccability better than, say, simple appeals to perfect divine goodness. While recognizing that HFDA may not decisively imply Christ's impeccability, Murphy submits that the demands of absolute holiness preclude God from joining Himself to a sinful creaturely nature.

We offer two brief responses on the issue of Christ's impeccability. First, there might be a metaphysical reason for Christ's impeccability. For all we know, for every full assumption of a human nature by a divine person, this (on pain of monothelitism) includes two wills, one divine and one human. Once such an incarnation takes place it might also be necessary (on pain of Nestorianism, for example) that the human will follows the divine will for any choice

¹⁷ Another option apparently available to the proponent of AFDA comes from Alexander Pruss (2016), which is referenced but not engaged by Murphy (but see O'Connor 2022).

made, as the Third Council of Constantinople indicates (e.g., Tanner 1990, 128). Add to this that God cannot intentionally perform any evil action (see Murphy 2017, 85-102) on account of His moral perfection, absolute holiness, or both. Given these commitments, Christ's impeccability would seem to follow, and yet no reliance on HFDA *per se* is apparently required (even if some strong account of holiness and/or moral perfection is).¹⁸ Second, it's plausible that the defender of AFDA who also thinks that God is absolutely holy can rely on much of Murphy's reasoning from holiness to impeccability. Such a defender of AFDA might even say that divine persons have absolutely decisive reasons of holiness never to unite oneself with evil agentively, even if God's reasons of holiness are generally not as weighty as they would be on HFDA. Minimally, given the aforementioned distinction between incongruous and improper relationships, the proponent of AFDA can plausibly say that it would be improper for God to unite Himself agentively with sinful creaturely action, and thus has strong requiring reasons to avoid doing so. But this would be to put AFDA and HFDA on apparently equal footing. If either or both of these basic options work, it's not clear that HFDA enjoys an explanatory advantage over AFDA on the issue of Christ's impeccability.

With respect to the normative weirdness of the Incarnation, Murphy recognizes that the traditional Christian explanation for why God became incarnate is that God loves humans (Murphy 2021, 168). In fact, this is something that Murphy happily affirms. But he maintains that appeals to the wonderful love of God for why He became incarnate, and subsequently was crucified, are insufficient to capture the normative weirdness at issue (Murphy 2021, 170-171). What's required is that the weight of God's reasons strongly favor God not becoming incarnate.

We hold a different view. The revelation of God in Jesus is one fundamentally of love. If we are right about this, then the default expectation (given that God has created) would be that God would become incarnate (even if there are reasons of holiness that could make His refraining from incarnating as human rational, contrary to His requiring reasons of love). Still, Murphy is right that the incarnation is considerably and normatively strange (cf. Ps. 8). We locate the weirdness in the same realm of value that Murphy identifies with holiness since there certainly is something strange about a being of such immense status choosing to relate to us via Incarnation. But *given* that God's default framework of agency is one of love (and given the noncomparative nature of love), the Incarnation, although weird when considering the comparative status between creator and creatures, is nevertheless expected.

So, AFDA predicts the Incarnation better than HFDA. If anything, the former framework orients one toward the position that God would have become Incarnate even if no humans had sinned (see van Driel 2008). Given that there has been an Incarnation, we take this to count in favor of AFDA.

Similar reasoning applies to the atonement. For Murphy (Chapter 9), one fundamental point of the atonement is that God wants to deal with an obstacle to the *fittingness* of His union with human persons—that is, an obstacle grounded in the fact that humans have sinned. Whatever the mechanism of atonement is, it somehow removes or lessens the obstacle to union in a manner that attends to the importance of God's holiness.

Murphy takes the fact that Christ's atoning work addresses issues of fitness for union to favor HFDA over alternatives, but we assess things differently. If God values greater union with humanity (due to His love), and if sin threatens to diminish the degree of union achievable between God and humanity, then the default expectation of how God would respond to sin

¹⁸ To suppose that God is absolutely holy and that this holiness precludes God from intentionally committing evil acts hardly seems to require HFDA.

would include atonement for sin. Nevertheless, if we allow for the idea that God has strong requiring reasons not to forge relationships with sinful creatures, since such relationships would be improper, the proponent of AFDA can add that holiness also provides an obstacle for *God* to be unified to humanity. But insofar as God's holiness prevents God from fulfilling the purpose for which God made humans, namely achieving everlasting ecstatic union with Himself, we would expect God to do something about this obstacle, given AFDA. In other words, we think that considerations of atonement demonstrate that differences in status between God and humanity might need to be dealt with—e.g., by increasing the status of humanity—to achieve more loving union between them. But what is crucial to notice is that this shows that reasons of love are motivating atonement at bottom, not reasons of holiness.

But, of course, there is more. The atonement of Christ included an incredibly deep kind of involvement with fallen humans. Among other things, it involves God experiencing death through Christ, a most ungodlike process to experience, for the sake of human redemption. AFDA predicts these features of atonement better than HFDA, since it's the former account which more greatly emphasizes the centrality and strength of love within God's motivational character. So, this is yet another point in favor of AFDA.

Now we turn to eschatology. Murphy argues in Chapter 10 that HFDA explains the possibility of everlasting damnation better than alternative frameworks. Put succinctly, he maintains that God might, on account of His requiring reasons of holiness, withdraw from confirmed sinners, leaving them in their self-imposed sinful condition forever. Frameworks that place a premium on weighty requiring reasons of divine love apparently don't have similarly available resources.

On the way to this conclusion, Murphy critiques autonomy-based arguments for the possibility of eternal damnation. He suggests that a God driven primarily by love would likely override the freedom of the persistently rebellious in order to save them (Murphy 2021, 227-228). But that's unclear. Many hold that God created humans as free and rational creatures and that God's final purposes for humans include fulfilling, not bypassing, this capacity. To bypass this capacity systematically would be to defeat God's purposes and leave the telos of those creatures overridden fundamentally unfulfilled. This would be a kind of hell, only of the much more pleasant variety (see Kvanvig 2011, 12-16). While we cannot make the case presently, we maintain that it's plausible to suppose that God has very strong requiring reasons of love not to bring about such an outcome. Such a way of uniting to the creature doesn't appear to exemplify loving respect for either God (since it may be important to God that creatures relate to Him in the right kind of way, given how He has made them) or the creature, even if the creature is unaware of the reality.

But should the proponent of AFDA hold that God gives the damned endless opportunities to repent and join the glorified saints? Perhaps. However, as Zachary Manis (2019) basically argues, maybe God has reasons of love—concerning the balance of overall creaturely welfare—eventually to unveil His manifest presence throughout all of creation, and maybe this unveiling confirms the fate of the damned. We cannot develop such a model here, but suffice it to say that the defender of AFDA has many resources for accounting for the possibility of everlasting damnation (especially when we keep in mind that God has reasons of holiness, and sometimes very weighty ones, to avoid incongruous and improper relationships), even if one grants that HFDA has an advantage on this score.

However, consider the other final fate of humans, Heaven. Murphy (2021, 217-218) provides reason to suppose that Heaven ought to be thought to include *epektasis* for humans: an everlasting condition of ever-increasing unity with God. Unsurprisingly, we think such a

view of Heaven is better predicted by AFDA than it is by HFDA, and so provides some reason to favor the former.

The final theological topic concerns divine humility. In Chapter 11 Murphy argues that “divine humility consists in God’s not acting on reasons of status at all, or not acting on them so far as their requiring force would dictate, but instead acting on reasons of creaturely goodness” (2021, 244). Murphy further explains that divine humility is contingent (e.g., *Ibid.*, 249). Taken together the idea seems to be that God is humble in virtue of acting on account of creaturely goodness despite the fact that God’s default setting vis-à-vis creation is to act in accordance with His own (exalted) reasons of status.

But, as Murphy would likely agree (e.g., Murphy 2021, 248), his view hardly marks out God as one with a humble *character* rather than one who occasionally or even often *acts* humbly. No, the God of humble character would be one who is *predisposed* not to act on reasons of status (at least those emerging from incongruous as opposed to improper relations) but instead on reasons of creaturely goodness. This would seem to be the humble God’s default setting. Importantly, moreover, certain leading New Testament scholars interpret Philippians 2:5-11, perhaps the most significant text on divine humility, as manifesting a deep truth about the divine *character*. For example, C.F.D. Moule and N.T. Wright independently argue that the opening clause of v. 6 (“who though he was in the form of God”) should be understood as causal rather than concessive. On this reading, it is “precisely *because* he [i.e., Christ] was in the form of God he reckoned equality with God not as a matter of getting but of giving” (Moule, 1997, 97; cf. Wright 1986, 344-352). In other words, it’s the very character of God to behave in truly humble, giving ways. But this is precisely what one would expect if AFDA were so. In typical circumstances, God would have strong requiring reasons to act on account of creaturely goodness and (unless, perhaps, the relevant relation is improper) only weaker reasons to act on account of His own status. Insofar as we have reason to think that this analysis of divine humility is closer to the truth, the conviction that God acts humbly because He is humble in character supports AFDA over HFDA.¹⁹

Our sense, then, is that AFDA has greater explanatory power than its alternative with respect to the theological issues discussed.

4. Accounting for God’s Love

Our goal in this paper has been to offer AFDA as an alternative to HFDA as a framework for divine action. In §2, we provided reflections on the comparative prior probabilities of HFDA and AFDA and suggested that there was good reason to take the prior probabilities of both frameworks to be roughly equivalent. §3 introduced a wide range of theological data to consider in assessing the comparative explanatory power of AFDA and HFDA. In this concluding section, we offer a brief Bayesian representation of how we have weighted each datum—in favor of either AFDA or HFDA—to make clear why we think AFDA is a serious contender for being the better framework of divine action.

The data surveyed in §3 were these: (1) scriptural invocations of divine love or holiness, (2) the fact of divine creation and God’s intention to indwell that creation, (3) considerations

¹⁹ Murphy’s fundamental objection (cf. 2021, 243-244) to a theory of divine humility like the one we propose would seem to be that it doesn’t account for the normative weirdness of the Incarnation and it wrongly presupposes that creaturely goods can provides requiring reasons for God to act. However, we have already given our take on these matters and so will not revisit them here.

of the Incarnation, (4) the Atonement, (5) eschatology, and (6) divine humility. Although we think there is plausibility to someone seeing all of this data as favoring AFDA over HFDA, we do not make that claim here. Rather, we think the discussion in §3 justifies the slightly weaker claim that HFDA is not favored by any of the data while AFDA is favored by some: namely, the data regarding creation (C), the Incarnation (I), Atonement (A), and divine Humility (H).

If we let ‘B’ represent background theological knowledge and ‘D’ represent the data surveyed in §3, then the comparative probability of AFDA and HFDA can be represented using the odds form of Bayes’ Theorem:

$$\frac{\Pr(HFDA|D \& B)}{\Pr(AFDA|D \& B)} = \frac{\Pr(D|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(D|AFDA \& B)} \times \frac{\Pr(HFDA|B)}{\Pr(AFDA|B)}$$

The right-hand factor represents the comparative prior probabilities of HFDA and AFDA, which, given that we suggested both prior probabilities were roughly equivalent, simply cancels out.²⁰ This means that the comparative probability of HFDA and AFDA is equivalent to the likelihood of the data surveyed in §3.

To calculate the middle factor—the comparative likelihood factor—we can break ‘D’ down into the factors identified above as favoring AFDA over HFDA. This results in:

$$\begin{aligned} &\frac{\Pr(D|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(D|AFDA \& B)} \\ &= \frac{\Pr(C|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(C|AFDA \& B)} \times \frac{\Pr(I|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(I|AFDA \& B)} \times \frac{\Pr(A|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(A|AFDA \& B)} \\ &\times \frac{\Pr(H|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(H|AFDA \& B)} \end{aligned}$$

Let’s assume that our reflections in §3 demonstrate that each of these data support AFDA over HFDA to the same degree and that the degree is relatively modest (say, we treat each fraction as 2/3). In that case, we get:

$$\frac{\Pr(D|HFDA \& B)}{\Pr(D|AFDA \& B)} = \frac{2}{3} \times \frac{2}{3} \times \frac{2}{3} \times \frac{2}{3} = \frac{16}{81}$$

Given that the comparative probabilities of AFDA and HFDA are identical to the comparative likelihoods here, this probability assignment implies that AFDA is about five times more likely than HFDA. Of course, that AFDA seems about *five times as probable* as HFDA is in part an accidental feature of our chosen weightings. The actual number isn’t all that important. But what is important is that if we are right about this data favoring AFDA over HFDA, even only modestly, then Murphy’s apparent claim that HFDA is more plausible due to the low prior probabilities of its competitors only succeeds if the prior probability of HFDA is at least as (actually, more) weighty than the likelihood data we have considered against it. Either that, or Murphy will need to lean heavily on the problems of evil and divine hiddenness as that which substantially diminishes the plausibility of AFDA and, thus, renders HFDA more probable

²⁰ It cancels out since any number divided by itself equals 1, and multiplying the middle factor by 1 does not change the overall value of the equation.

overall. And while we do not think this path is likely to get Murphy to the desired destination, we save that discussion for another occasion.²¹

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