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## Is a Perfect God Worthy of Our Praise?

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**Senior Honors Project:**

Is a Perfect God Worthy of Our Praise?

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**Abstract:** This project examines the Judeo-Christian notion of God's essential perfection as a problem for God's praiseworthiness. Granted that God cannot commit any action less perfect than what God performs, God seems to lack the freedom to be responsible and is thus rendered ineligible for praise. In exploring another kind of responsibility, I argue that an essentially perfect God can be considered responsible in another sense, which may warrant at least one form of praise-practice: a praise that simply acknowledges expression of the Good.

**Introductory note:** I stumbled into this problem of praise my first year as an undergraduate, in a course on Philosophy of Religion. Since then it's been one of the several challenges I continue to wrestle with, as both a self-critiquing Catholic and a student to philosophy. Only recently did I return to the issue with a new lens, after a summer of collaborative research on Stoicism, Daoism, and contemporary views of free agency. This experience equipped me with methods to intertwine religious ideals of freedom with the messy, metaphysical issues that continue to mystify contemporary thinkers today.

Senior Honors Project

PHL 491H

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## Is a Perfect God Worthy of Our Praise?

### I. INTRODUCTION

In discussions of an agent's responsibility, or worthiness for praise and blame, philosophers aim to identify conditions for moral agency or freedom. When applying some concepts of responsibility to the Judeo-Christian notion of God, however, problems arise. The issue this paper addresses is generated by the claim that God's perfect goodness is essential to God. An essentially perfectly good God could do none other than the perfectly good action; moreover, God could not *be* more or less perfect than what God essentially is. These restrictions seem to create a problem for praise: after all, why praise a God who is not free to do otherwise?

In light of this issue, I will first consider two possibilities for praising God: praising God for *what God does* and praising God for *who God is*. Daniel Howard-Snyder, among others, examines God's inability to do otherwise and concludes, with discomfort, that the practice of praising God is rational only if God is not essentially unsurpassably good. Howard-Snyder raises an interesting issue, though within a narrow framework for freedom and responsibility – one that hinges on the ability to do otherwise. In this project, I hope to expand the discussion to include different ways of thinking about praise. Recent work on moral responsibility has illuminated distinctions between praise and blame-oriented attitudes to elucidate different forms of responsibility. Following Susan Wolf's asymmetrical thesis, I will argue that the blame-focused responsibility that requires access to alternatives does not accurately capture praise-warranting conditions. To understand the form of responsibility relevant for praising God, I will appeal to a version of Gary Watson's *aretaic* responsibility: a perspective of responsibility that doesn't hold the agent *accountable*, but merely attributes actions to an agent as manifestations of their virtue or character (Watson 1996: 229).<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that while God may not possess an accountability-kind of responsibility, God does possess *aretaic* responsibility – and this is sufficient for rendering appropriate certain kinds of praise. I hope to demonstrate that the conditions relevant for such praise should focus on the

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<sup>1</sup> *aretaic* comes from the Greek root *arête*, meaning excellence or virtue (Hursthouse 2018)

agent's *alignment with the Good*, rather than on the agent's ability to do otherwise. Finally, I briefly describe some further puzzles that arise from my application of Wolf's view. First, though, I'd like to make a few preliminary notes.

## II. THE 'RIGHTNESS' OF PRAISE

People: It is right to give him thanks and praise.

Celebrant: It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth (Rite Two of Catholic Eucharistic Prayer, as cited in Howard-Snyder 2008: 1).

What do we mean by "it is *right* to give God praise"? One reading could be that there is motivation to praise God for the favorable consequences the practice would bring about; for example, it might promote self-flourishing, spiritual comfort, or relationship with the Divine (Howard-Snyder 2008: 2). Another reading of the term "right" could be that it is one's duty or obligation to praise God. My use of the terms 'right', 'appropriate', and 'warranted' in this paper will employ neither of these readings; my interest, instead, solely involves the worthiness of the object of praise. I suspect, too, that the first two readings only explain the appropriateness of praise insofar as there is some trait in God's activity or being that warrants praise in the first place, though that is discussion for another time.<sup>2</sup>

I also aim to limit the discussion to praise in the moral sense. No doubt, Judeo-Christian expressions of praise reference God's power, might, beauty, artistry, and so on.<sup>3</sup> The kind of praise I'm after, though, is the kind that references God's Goodness. For this reason, I would like to simplify the discussion by setting aside puzzles of gratitude and love. Indeed, praise-in-the-moral-sense often involves attitudes of gratitude or love. But when feeling grateful or love for a person or their actions one needn't exercise moral judgement.<sup>4</sup> Though similar problems of

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder opens his piece "The Puzzle of Prayer and Thanksgiving" with a similar point: "Indeed, other reasons for thanks and praise either don't apply to God (e.g. his feelings would be hurt if we didn't thank and praise him) or, if they do apply to him, they apply at least in part because he is worthy of our thanks and praise (e.g. thanking and praising promotes and preserves our relationship with him)" (2008:2).

<sup>3</sup> see, for example, 1 Chronicles 29:11

<sup>4</sup> In their work "Love as a Reactive Emotion", Kate Abramson and Adam Leite make an interesting case for love as a "reaction to perceived morally significant traits in the love-object" (2011: 674). There is significant dispute, however, as to whether love is reasons-responsive. (For further reading on this, Harry Frankfurt's *Reasons of Love* is a good place to start.)

agency may challenge attitudes of gratitude, I fear the best solution I can arrive at for praiseworthiness may not directly serve as explanation for God's worthiness of thanks.

### III. THE PROBLEM: GOD LACKS LEEWAY

There are two popular notions of divine praise: praising X *for what X does* and praising X *for who X is*. Against the claim that an essentially perfect being is praiseworthy in the first sense, Daniel Howard-Snyder argues that one deserves thanks or praise for their action only if that action 'redounds to one's credit'; and, if an action redounds to one's credit, then they must have been able to do something worse in place of it (Howard-Snyder 2008: 2, 3). From these premises, Howard-Snyder concludes that since God is unable to do anything worse in place of the actions he performs, those acts fail to "redound to his credit". Thus, God cannot be both essentially unsurpassably good and worthy of our praise.

Howard-Snyder's argument employs a picture of moral responsibility that presupposes *some ability to do otherwise*, a thesis known as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP). By this picture of free will,<sup>5</sup> we might imagine an agent's future as "a garden of forking paths branching off from a single past", where "freely willed action arises" whenever present circumstances offer multiple paths into the future (McKenna and Coates 2020). But must every instance of action that redounds to our credit require a fork in the road?

Looser applications of PAP attribute responsibility for actions so long as there are *some* points of leeway, or alternate possibilities, in the agent's past. Robert Kane develops this view with his account of *ultimate* responsibility. He points out that the freedom we really care about when we worry about possibly deterministic factors governing our lives –e.g., the laws of physics, necessary causes, and/or, in God's case, essential properties – isn't mere freedom of action but, rather, the freedom of the will (Kane 2009: 35-44). In Kane's view, "an agent can be ultimately responsible" for decisions causally-determined by the agent's character traits, "[b]ut somewhere among the events that contributed (however indirectly) to her having those traits, and thus to her decision, there must have been some free actions by her that were not causally

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I associate the terms 'free will' and 'free agency' with moral responsibility in the sense that an agent is morally responsible for action only if they act of their free will. In the discussion to follow, I will distinguish different kinds of responsibility, which require different kinds of free will or free agency.

determined” (Clarke 2017).<sup>6</sup> In other words, at the time of action, the agent need not deliberate on and have access to a range of possibilities to be ultimately responsible for each action; rather, they merely need the ability to have done otherwise at some, character-forming point(s) in time in their respective histories (ibid). Kane calls actions made at those previous critical junctions, *self-forming actions* (SFA’s):

Often in everyday life, we act “of our own free will” in the sense of a will already formed. But on such occasions, the will (i.e., character, motives and purposes) from which we act is “our own free will” to the extent that we had a role in forming it by earlier SFAs that were not determined and with respect to which we could have voluntarily and rationally done otherwise.

Many times, it’s those actions which redound to the agent’s credit that are most predictable, given that agent’s character. When an action simply flows from an agent’s well-formed will and history, it’s natural to consider that agent ultimately responsible – even if any other decision would seem utterly implausible for that agent to commit.<sup>7</sup>

For divine agency, however, the forking path model at some earlier point in God’s history is an awkward fit. If God’s unsurpassable goodness is truly essential, God does not enjoy the “liberty” of SFA’s – there is but one path of unsurpassably good choices. Without those forks in the road, God seems to be much less “free” than humans in a deeper, self-forming sense, as not even God could be greater than ‘the Being than which no greater is possible’ (Saint Anselm, as cited in Oppy 2020). For some, this inability to self-refine not only poses a threat for the praiseworthiness of God’s actions, but also for our second form of praise: praising God for who God is.

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<sup>6</sup> In focusing on the specific threat that PAP poses to divine freedom, I will set aside the broader worry of *causal determinism* relevant to human agents’ responsibility. As the forthcoming discussion will demonstrate, the worry for the praiseworthiness of divine agency involves an *internal* determinism, due to essential traits. This is to be contrasted with human agents, supposing we are “free” from necessary forces of imperfections or perfections in character.

<sup>7</sup> In his famous challenge against Rome, Martin Luther concludes, “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me!” We could take his statement in the most literal sense, yet still consider his action as redounding to his credit. In doing so, though, we are referring to his history of self-forming choices, which led him to circumstances (both external and inward) that left him no other option but to stand up against injustice.

As Howard-Snyder points out, praising God *for who God is*, confronts the same issues we'd begun with:

Roughly, if God is worthy of praise for who he is, he is worthy of praise for his goodness, in which case it redounds to his credit that he is good, which implies that there was a time when he was able to do something about whether he is good. But, if God is essentially unsurpassable in goodness, there never was such a time. Thus, if God is essentially unsurpassable in goodness, he is not worthy of praise for who he is (Howard-Snyder 2008: 20).

In short, God's character and will are just as bound by God's essential properties as God's actions are bound by those same essential properties. Another way of conceiving this issue is in terms of *historicism*, "the view that whether an agent is responsible...depends not just on how the agent is then, but also on the agent's history" (Kittle 2016: 105-106). As Simon Kittle describes the view,

...the idea is that the agent performs a series of actions which contribute to the forming of their character. In doing so, they become responsible not only for their character but also for any actions which subsequently issue automatically from that character (106).

Kittle refers to Kevin Timpe's work on divine freedom to show how historicism resolves certain actions issued from 'fixed' characters. The saints in heaven are thought to be perfectly good, or "impeccable", once in heaven; however, they can still be considered free agents (and thus responsible for even their perfect actions) because of the choices they'd made during their earthly lives that had led them to those fixed characters (Kittle 2016: 106). Unlike the saints' respective characters, God's is never 'unfixed'; thus, historicism-accounts for free agency fail to explain God's responsibility for God's own goodness.

Some might defend the view that God *does* make some undetermined choices via access to alternatives. God might, for example, at least sometimes have the ability to choose between two or more equally (morally) good options. Though this poses an interesting possibility for divine agency, solutions that come of it seem to fall short of *praise-warranting* agency.

According to Judeo-Christian thought, God is not only thought to be morally perfect, but also perfectly rational; in other words, God must always have sufficient reason for acting (Kittle 2016: 115). In choosing between two equally perfect actions, however, God would be choosing one over another either out of (i) randomness, or (ii) reasons other than moral reasons. The

former option – which we might think of as a “coin-toss” result – seems to dispute God’s property of perfect rationality; the latter exhibits a reasons-responsiveness, but not of the right sort for moral praise.

If (ii) is true, other forms of praise may still apply. Perhaps, for example, we deem God’s agency appropriate for praise for the aesthetic route God opted for in creating *this* world, over a different-looking world. But my concern is praise in the moral sense. Option (i), on the other hand, doesn’t seem to grant God enough freedom for the kind of responsibility we care about. As J.M. Fischer puts it, “responsibility requires that there be alternative possibilities of a certain sort” (Fischer 1998: 100); in Fischer’s view, these mere “flickers of freedom” do not exhibit the *guidance control* from the agent that grounds moral responsibility. Fischer argues that “*the mere possibility of something different happening*” isn’t enough to ground our judgements of responsibility (ibid). This seems to suggest that something more than mere alternate possibilities matter for praise-warranting agency. Mere choice isn’t enough; moral reasons, whatever their role may be, seem to matter more.

So long as we grant that God, indeed, lacks the freedom to do otherwise, there remain two challenges for defending God’s moral responsibility: one to do with the freedom involved with God’s actions, and the other to do with the freedom involved with God’s character, or self-formation. But all this relies on the notion of moral responsibility as contingent upon the ability to do otherwise -- if not in the narrow sense, then at least at some previous point in the road. In most recent discussions, though, authors have challenged the relevance of AP’s for praise-related attitudes and for certain kinds of responsibility.

#### **IV. ASYMMETRIES BETWEEN PRAISE AND OTHER JUDGEMENTS OF RESPONSIBILITY**

The interesting thing about the worrisome sort of ‘determinism’ that lies behind God’s goodness is its *internal* nature. The Judeo-Christian notion of God represents an agent perfectly free from external sources of determinism, but meanwhile confined – in action and character – to an internal necessitation. Susan Wolf addresses a popular worry that bears significant resemblance to our present problem: that *psychological determinism* would undermine human free agency. The concern is that psychological determinism – the condition in which our inward states necessitate the decisions we act on – undermines the free agency we care about for responsibility practices like blame, praise, and resentment (Wolf 1980: 152). The idea is that if



an agent's actions are determined by their interests (ie. desires, values), and those interests "are determined by heredity and environment", then the agent seems to lack a certain requisite control over his actions, as "he cannot but perform the actions he performs" (1980: 152). Wolf exposes a conflicting intuition, however, when it comes to praiseworthy action:

When we imagine an agent who performs right actions...we imagine an agent who is rightly determined: whose actions, that is, are determined by the right sorts of interests, and whose interests are determined by the right sorts of reasons. But an agent who is *not* psychologically determined cannot perform actions that are right in this way (Wolf 1980: 153, *my italics*).

Why not? A completely undetermined agent is so free that their decision-making is "free from moral reasons" (1980: 166). It seems, then, our intuitions tell us that *some* determinism is important for us to salvage the moral responsibility we expect from praiseworthy activity. Moreover, a certain psychological determinism to do the right thing may seem to make the agent or their action even more praiseworthy. As Wolf points out, the language "he couldn't help it" or "she couldn't resist" expresses a certain excellence or virtue in the agent's disposition (1980: 156). An inability to do anything other than the right thing shouldn't lessen the credit that he deserves, "[f]or presumably the reason he cannot do otherwise is that his virtue is so sure or his moral commitment so strong" (1980: 156). So, to mend this rift in our intuitions, Wolf proposes an Asymmetrical Thesis for freedom: praiseworthiness does not require that the agent could have done otherwise, while blameworthiness does. Could Wolf be right?

In some cases, it might seem that some amount of indeterminism does seem to be relevant for praiseworthiness. Jonathon Bennett draws out the following example. Imagine a seemingly generous benefactor who, in reality, suffers from a perpetual, insane compulsion to give things away. Upon discovering this psychological explanation for the agent's acts, it seems reasonable that our praise-related attitudes toward the agent and their gift-giving would change (Bennett 2008: 2). But do we retract our praise because the agent lacked an ability to do otherwise?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Unlike Wolf, Bennett does not make any asymmetrical distinction between praiseworthiness and blameworthiness; rather, he considers both susceptible to issues of avoidability (see in discussion below) and relevant for accountability (see Bennett 2008: 2).

If we follow Wolf's view, the answer is no. The reason why our attitudes change instead has to do with the agent's capacity to recognize and act in accord with the relevant moral reasons (Watson 1996: 241). The compulsive benefactor's action is not governed by any reasons (generosity, frugality, and so on) that would indicate the exercise of her moral capacity; rather, she acts out of compulsion. Praise-related attitudes would seem to be an inappropriate response to the benefactor's agency. The reason, though, doesn't have to do with the agent's lack of alternatives; rather, it's a certain sensitivity to moral reasons that's missing. From this shift in focus to moral considerations as central to free agency arises the asymmetry between praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. As Watson lays out,

If someone acts well because of a moral clarity and commitment so strong that she could not have done otherwise, then we still think her praiseworthy. But if she acts badly because her deprived childhood has rendered her unable to care about the moral considerations in question, then she is not thought to be blameworthy (ibid).

Wolf describes this sensitivity to "the True and the Good" as *the sanity condition*. She offers this source of internal freedom as the kind relevant for moral responsibility:

although we may not be *metaphysically* responsible for ourselves -- for, after all, we did not create ourselves from nothing -- we are *morally* responsible for ourselves, for we are able to understand and appreciate right and wrong, and to change our characters and our actions accordingly (2013: 292).<sup>9</sup>

In a sense, God's decisive character of essentially unsurpassable goodness resembles the case of psychological determinism: both agents "have characters that inevitably lead to certain [behavior] the production of which they did not control" (Kittle 2016: 109).<sup>10</sup> Though there are

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<sup>9</sup> Wolf is not the first to shift the picture of free agency toward a focus on the internal structure of the agent. Her "sane deep-self view" builds off of other views of internally sourced freedom (which she calls 'deep-self views'), such as those offered by Gary Watson, Harry Frankfurt, and Charles Taylor. The distinguishing feature of Wolf's view is that the normative component of her account is linked to an objective source of morally correct reasons. While Watson, Frankfurt, and Taylor source agential control in the ability to accord our actions with "our deepest selves", Wolf argues that moral agency requires the further ability to accord our deep selves to the True and the Good. Self-revision isn't enough; rather, *moral* responsibility requires "the capacity for self-correction" (Wolf 2013: 292, 293, my italics).

<sup>10</sup> In his commentary on Timpe's work, Kittle likens God's case of internal determinism to his imagined Colin character, who has acquired a trait which makes him experience "a psychological

no external factors (ie. heredity or environment) to determine God's interests, God is internally bound by a determining, essential feature. Due to this source of metaphysical determinism, God lacks that same kind of 'control' (via access to AP's) that the compulsive gift-giver lacks. 'Compulsive' would be a surprising description for God; we might picture, however, a similar immediacy – a certain non-deliberation, or absence in choice – to God's activity. The difference between God and the compulsive beneficiary, though, is that *God's activity is morally expressive*. While the gift-giver acts out of compulsion, God acts from Perfect Goodness. God didn't just commit a perfect act in creating the universe; God committed the act perfectly – that is, in perfect accord with the True and the Good.

As some have pointed out, views preoccupied with an access to alternatives are often oriented around a concern about *avoidability*. Both Watson and Wolf consider this a distinguishing trait for accountability practices, as it's "these concerns about fairness that underlie the requirement of control (or avoidability) as a condition of moral accountability" (Watson 1996: 235). To weigh the appropriateness of blame-related accountability practices, it is natural to consider whether the agent could avoid the blame she receives for her action – and without access to alternatives, the agent has no way of avoiding the resentment, reprimand, or blame that her actions result in. In other words, we only deserve to suffer the blame we can avoid (Watson 1996: 239); meanwhile, praise does not run up against this same issue of 'fairness' for the agent.

Another reason to set aside the AP-requirement for cases of praiseworthy agency is that praiseworthiness often references an agent's *virtue* or excellence, which does not fit the schema of minimum conditions. The AP-requirement suggests certain bare minimum standards of moral agency only relevant for the practice of *holding* an agent responsible. Andrew Eshleman challenges the method of "mirroring" praise-conditions onto our intuitive views of blame-conditions:

This methodological assumption is often accompanied by a more substantive assumption[:] that the freedom reflected in action that warrants praise is no different from the freedom exercised by the agent who merits blame. ...[T]his assumption obscures

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state that makes it inevitable...he will pick up the phone and donate some money to charity" (Kittle 2016: 109).

important aspects of genuinely virtuous agency since part of what we often find praiseworthy is an enhancement of the virtuous agent's freedom (Eshleman 2014: 217). Eshleman seeks to decouple praise and blame as counterparts to acknowledge the 'enhancement' of freedom that virtuous agency often reflects. While accounts for blameworthiness examine an agent's capacity to fulfill certain minimal moral demands, accounts for praiseworthiness tend to consider the *excellence* of one's action or character – whose virtue goes beyond the threshold of “minimal decency” relevant for holding a person accountable (Eshleman 2014: 216, 233). God's situation highlights the flaw in threshold-notions for praise-related agency; as Kittle points out (though to address a different issue), “being perfectly morally good encompasses more than just fulfilling one's obligations” (Kittle 2015: 115).<sup>11</sup> If we combine this with Wolf's view, we might understand 'sanity' as a degree-concept, that can exceed and be perfected beyond the minimum capacity required for blame-focused moral responsibility. Eshleman notes, “the point is not merely that the actions of some people are more virtuous than others...but that people vary in the degree to which they can, or are free to, act virtuously” (2014: 233-234). This might explain the disjunction between God's lack of alternatives and the Judeo-Christian conception of God's *optimal* freedom. The challenges in section III reference a kind of freedom that is perhaps relevant for candidacy in the blame-world; virtue or excellence, though, express a kind of freedom in which matters of control and choice seem to eventually fall away, the more perfectly-fixed an agent's character becomes. God, as *perfectly* free, enjoys perfect unity between God's character, motivations, and the Good. In the close of “Free Agency”, Watson imagines God as “the only free agent” with this unity in mind; his notion of free agency, however, emphasizes an internal cohesion between values and motives within the agent:

In the case of God, who is omnipotent and omniscient, there can be no disparity between valuational and motivational systems. The dependence of motivation upon evaluation is total, for there is but a single source of motivation: his presumably benign judgement (Watson 1975: 220).

Though the unity between God's valuational and motivational systems is important, my Wolf-inspired emphasis is on an accordance to reasons external to the agent's internal systems, ie. the

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<sup>11</sup> Kittle responds with this to a different matter: the possibility that God could create some world other than the best possible world, having no obligation (to us) to create any particular world at all.

Good. God's perfectly "benign judgement" is the perfected version of an increasingly "fixed", virtuous character. In praising God, one acknowledges God's perfect insight of the relevant, normative reasons.

In sum, there are at least three reasons to decouple accounts for praiseworthiness and views that involve AP-conditions. As Wolf points out, praiseworthy action already indicates a sense of moral sanity in the agent; so long as an agent exhibits this capacity, it does not matter if they had the ability to do otherwise. Moreover, a certain kind of psychological determinism from praiseworthy agents indicates a virtuous character, or moral excellence; and, if these cases of psychological determinism do not follow the PAP-model, neither should the case of God's internal necessitation. Finally, there seems to be an enhanced 'freedom' found in virtuous agency – one that cannot be explained by the structure of 'minimal decency' which grounds accountability practices. One might wonder, though, what this notion of free agency looks like in terms of *responsibility*. Before turning to Watson's 'aretaic face' of responsibility, I'd like to further discuss my application of Wolf's view and what sort of notion of 'agency' comes of it when applied to the case of the Divine.

## V. THE DEPARTURE FROM CONTROL-VIEWS

Wolf's account of free agency was not the first to take a normative turn in the moral responsibility discussion; rather, several works before her shifted focus from metaphysical constraints to instead the agent's evaluative structure and capacity. Wolf offers a version of a preexisting view – what she calls *the deep self view* – referencing notions of free agency from other authors, such as Harry Frankfurt and Gary Watson. Proponents of the deep self view aim to source an agent's action to the "deep self" of the agent. Wolf writes,

As Frankfurt, Watson, and Taylor showed us, in order to be free and responsible we need not only to be able to control our actions in accordance with our desires, we need to be able to control our desires in accordance with our deepest selves (2013: 292).

Wolf points out that the deep-self views seek control via self-reformation. In each of these views, candidacy for moral accountability requires an ability to *self-revise*. For Frankfurt, the revision consists in according 'first-order desires' with second- or higher-order desires, which Frankfurt conceives as associated to the deeper self. As Frankfurt famously puts it, "a person's will is free only if he is free to have the will he wants" (Frankfurt 1971: 18). For Watson, on the other hand, self-revision consists in according one's motivational systems to their deeper, evaluative

structures (see Watson 1975). As mentioned above, since there is no disparity in God's 'mesh', or internal structures, God is supremely free on this view (1975: 220). These authors and other proponents of 'deep-self' views attribute an agent's conduct to her deep self when "she is at liberty (or able) both to govern her behavior on the basis of her will and to govern her will on the basis of her valuational system" (Wolf 1990: 33, as cited in Talbert 2019). Rather than seeking a kind of control over exterior circumstances (such as access to alternate possibilities), they vest agential 'control' in strictly the internal systems of the agent. It's not freedom of action we care about; it's freedom of the *will* (Frankfurt 1971: 14).<sup>12</sup> In Wolf's view, however, "there is a further kind of freedom we can want": the ability to self-*correct* (Wolf 2013: 292). It's not just the ability to change our values and desires that matters to us, but the ability to change them *for the better*.

There may be the worry that each of these deep-self views, Wolf's included, are grounded in something specific to finite, human agents: that ability to self-revise. Is this a necessary component for an agents' praiseworthiness? As discussed in Section III, God's necessary perfection nixes any possibility of self-creation or self-revision. This tension between contemporary conceptions of free agency – as *freedom of the will* – and the case of divine agency reveals a couple things about how we might apply Wolf's theory. First, it's important to remember that the self-correction requirement – according to Wolf's Asymmetrical Thesis – is only important for *blameworthy* cases of agency. If someone already exhibited the capacity to get it right, the condition of self-revision falls away. In other words, PAP-conditions, even in their looser forms (recall historicism and SFA views) seem unnecessary in the praiseworthy realm since the agent has already demonstrated the capacity to recognize and guide their behavior in accordance with the Good. In passing judgements about the praiseworthiness of others' actions, then, we set self-revision expectations aside.

The second point is not a reminder, but rather, an observation about Wolf's self-correction view and its role in the common, *human* concern about freedom. Although it may only apply as a condition for blameworthy cases, it is worth considering *why* the capacity to self-correct might be the further kind of freedom we would want. As agents capable of praising and

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<sup>12</sup> Among others, Frankfurt's and Watson's views are known as 'mesh theories', which give accounts for freedom "in terms of a well-functioning harmony between different psychic subsystems leading to action" (McKenna 2015: 45).

being praiseworthy, we very much care about our ability to self-correct. Indeed, it seems that receiving praise from others when we act well despite a flawed character can, at times, bring us to recognize the Good (surprisingly, via our own actions), so we might correct our characters accordingly. And more, in praising others, we often reference virtuous traits – traits that are exemplary and important to us in our own human paths of self-formation. So, though self-correction is not a condition for praiseworthiness, our human interest in it does seem to indicate a kind of ‘reference point’ for praise-judgements and moral judgements in general. As mentioned earlier, Eshleman associates moral excellence with an ‘enhancement’ of freedom. The interest in self-correction is important for finite beings, then, as it leads us to be more virtuous selves and thus, *more free*. God’s situation, meanwhile, already achieves the ideal of the perfectly virtuous Self, given God’s essential features. While accountability-practices indicate a reference point of bare minimal decency (and meanwhile a “threshold” of “freedom-relevant capacities”, see Eshleman 2014: 233), praise-responses reference a point toward which the human agent must self-correct oneself – a state of virtue (and perfect freedom-relevant capacity) which God already achieves.

Some worry that this picture of freedom does not capture the kind of agency relevant for moral responsibility. In his “Possibilities for Divine Freedom”, Kittle explores the possibility that ‘normative conceptions of freedom’ (such as Wolf’s) are answering an issue altogether different from moral responsibility. Kittle contrasts the normative conception of freedom with the “choice-focused control based theory” for freedom, associating the former with human flourishing, rather than the concern about moral responsibility (Kittle 2016: 103). He notes how different uses of the word ‘free’ can represent this disconnection between normative conceptions and moral responsibility:

We say...that the water is free to flow down the channel, but that doesn’t imply that the water exerts any kind of control over how it flows. This use of ‘free’ does suggest a lack of external obstacle but does not suggest an exercise of control. The use of ‘free’ in normative accounts of freedom concerns whether or not the agent has the capacities which allow it to achieve its true end and whether it exercises those capacities. But it’s possible that, like with the use of ‘free’ applicable to water, it implies nothing about the agent’s ability to control things (2016: 103).

The analogy is fitting for the divine case. Granted the Judeo-Christian notion of God's aseity, God is perfectly autonomous and self-derived; in other words, nothing external to God could influence the freedom of God's character or action. Meanwhile, God is restricted to only the path or "channel" carved out by God's own, essential Goodness.<sup>13</sup> This image of 'freely' flowing water invokes the worry that the kind of freedom I've ascribed to God is "not about control" – "and therefore not about moral responsibility" (Kittle 2016: 103).

Indeed, the further we stray from control-centered views, the more mysterious the application of the term 'responsibility' seems. Maybe 'praiseworthy' is the most we can say about God's agency and character, while 'morally responsible' oversteps my arrived-at conception of God's freedom.<sup>14</sup> But maybe not. As I will defend in the following sections, there is a kind of moral responsibility that can capture God's 'uncontrolled', morally expressive behavior.

## VI. THE ARETAIC FACE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Gary Watson makes an important distinction between responsibility in the *attributability* sense and responsibility in the accountability sense. He identifies the former with the self-disclosure view, "a view of free action and will as autonomy" (Watson 1996: 227). In this view, actions are free so long as they "express ourselves, in the required sense, whatever their farther causes may be" (ibid). According this face of responsibility, an agent is responsible for their action in the sense that their action is attributable to the deeper self, or the character, of the agent. As Watson puts it, "the significant relation between behavior and the real self is not (just) causal but *executive* and *expressive*" (1996: 233). While some regard attributability as morally shallow, Watson believes the self-disclosure view depicts "a core notion of responsibility," and thus can warrant moral appraisal:

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the *Daodejing of Laozi* incorporates the image of water as a metaphor for both the *dao* ("the way") and *de* ("the virtue"). The virtuous state is associated with being "supple and weak" (Ch. 78), "expansive...[f]lowing to the left and to the right" (Ch. 34), and lowly, situated as the "lesser state" (Ch. 61,66). It seems only the sage can achieve this, as wholly governed by the humble spontaneity of the Way. (See also Lu for further discussion and chapters of reference.)

<sup>14</sup> Or, worse, maybe praise for God and God's action is altogether *morally empty*; in other words, praise with respect to God's goodness would be no different from the kind of praise that acknowledges God's other admirable, essential traits, such as "all-powerful", or applauding God for creating something beautiful (recall these distinctions in Section II).



. . .evaluations [of the exercises of an agent's moral capacity] are inescapably evaluations of the agent because the conduct in question expresses the agent's own evaluative commitments, her adoption of some ends among others. . . . [I]f what I do flows from my values and ends, there is a stronger sense in which my activities are inescapably my own: I am committed to them. As declarations of my adopted ends, they express what I'm about, my identity as an agent (1996: 233).

For Watson, evaluations from the "aretaic perspective" are those that recognize an agent's deeper self – the excellences or faults in their character -- in their actions (1996: 231). Whereas accountability accounts of responsibility may further seek to determine the agent's control over those "adopted ends" from which their action flows, the attributability face of responsibility simply attributes an agent's activity to the agent, so long as the activity flows from their "evaluative self" (Watson 1975). Watson's conceived aretaic forms of praise and blame are responsive to the moral qualities of the agent, though they are "independent of...the practices of moral accountability" (Watson 1996: 231, Eshleman 2014: 218).

Eshleman further develops Watson's distinction between these two kinds of responsibility. While Watson seems to equate the aretaic face of responsibility with the more general responsibility-as-attributability, Eshleman distinguishes aretaic responsibility from "the minimal sort of attributability," identifying the former as "the more robust sort" (Eshleman 2014: 230). He writes,

Our assessment of whether an agent's action is properly attributable to her is concerned with whether the action is *her own* in the relevant sense. The relevant sense of ownership in the first minimal sense of attributability is defined by whether the action reflects the unimpaired exercise of that minimal form of agency distinctive of personhood. This form of responsibility-as-attributability is not, strictly speaking, a form of *moral* responsibility, though it serves as a baseline precondition of forms of moral responsibility. This can be seen from the fact that a young child's actions may be attributable in this minimal sense well before she possesses those further capacities that allow for genuine moral responsibility (2014: 230).

God, of course, possesses the *perfect* "capacities that allow for genuine moral responsibility" in the most ethically robust aretaic sense. Moreover, the aretaic face of responsibility depicts agency in a way that best fits the perfect, streamline correspondence (or "flow") between God's

character and God's action. As Watson imagines elsewhere, God suffers "no disparity" between God's internal structures (say, character and will); and, since external constraints are impossible for God, there is nothing to disconnect God's character and will from God's activity.

In Section III, I began by posing the puzzle of God's praiseworthiness in two ways: God's praiseworthiness for *who* God is, and God's praiseworthiness for *what* God does. With the aretaic perspective of responsibility, this distinction seems to fall away in the divine case. From the aretaic perspective, evaluations on the agent's conduct are, in fact, evaluations of the agent's "ends"; and, as Watson puts it, "an agent's ends" are "necessarily self-disclosing" (1996: 234). In David Hume's famous Second Treatise, he presents a view that would perhaps identify responsibility with *strictly* the aretaic sort:

Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who performed them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil. *The action itself may be blameable...But the person is not responsible for it*; and as it proceeded from nothing in him, that is durable or constant, and leaves nothing of that nature behind it, it is impossible he can, upon its account, become the object of punishment or vengeance (III.ii, my emphasis).

Many are uncomfortable with the Humean picture of responsibility, as it's common to blame or praise an agent for their action even when they've acted *out of character*. With respect to God, however, the distinction between praising "the action itself" and praising "the person" falls away. As a perfectly-'meshed' agent, God is incapable of acting out of character.

Whereas Wolf draws the line between praise and blame, made separate by the control-requirement (some ability to do otherwise), Watson draws a line between the accountability face and the attributability face of responsibility. Though Wolf's view does not ascribe the same ethical depth to attributability which Watson defends, these two views are compatible – in at least some ways – for the case of the divine. While accountability responsibility is inapplicable for God, God retains aretaic responsibility since divine agency perfectly expresses the relation between conduct and character. As Wolf's and other deep-self views illustrate, issues of praiseworthiness are best associated with issues of internal structure and capacities, rather than with issues of control. Wolf's additional condition of "moral sanity", however, adds something puzzling to the picture of God's responsibility. In the human case, this element of freedom

references an external source: the True and the Good. Problems arise, however, if we consider the Good external to God in the same way.

## VII. A PUZZLING RELATIONSHIP: GOD AND THE GOOD

Unlike Watson's and Frankfurt's internal views of freedom, Wolf's view depends on a sensitivity to reasons *external* to the agent. We might describe 'reasons-responsive' views such as Wolf's as "directed outwardly" (McKenna 2015: 45); rather than solely relying on "another loop [in] the internal structure of the agent", free agency requires a responsiveness to reasons outside the agent (Wolf, as cited in Watson 1996: 233). In the discussion above, I've noted that a) God meets the inward criterion of praise-warranting, free agency, and b) God meets the "sanity" condition (and does so perfectly), as maximally sensitive to the True and the Good. Furthermore, God *can* be considered free in the responsibility sense, so long as we take on the aretaic perspective of responsibility, which attributes actions to an agent when they flow from their character. But here a question arises from Wolf's *outwardly-directed* view: what is the relationship between God's character, or internal structures, and those reasons of the Good?

This is a version of a long-standing issue for theists on how best to understand the grounds for moral truth, whose promptings can be traced as far back as Plato's dialogues. In the famous exchange between Socrates and Euthyphro, Euthyphro claims, "piety is what all the gods love, and... impiety is what they all hate" (as cited in Timmons 2002: 27). Socrates replies, with the famous 'Euthyphro's dilemma': *Do the god's love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?* (ibid). In other words -- and in the context of the Judeo-Christian God -- "[e]ither morality depends on God's commands, or it does not" (Timmons 2002: 28). So which is it? Though space will not allow for full treatment of the issue here, I will briefly discuss the main alternatives in relation to the present project.

One could take the view that reasons underlying moral goodness are independent from God's reasons and are thus external to God as they are for any human agent. In this view, God performs perfectly good actions out of perfect "moral knowledge" of what is right and wrong, a set of truths independent from God's self (Timmons 2002: 30). This picture, however, seems to conflict with the Judeo-Christian notion of God as *creator of all that exists*. If there exists a moral standard independent from God, there exists something outside of God's creation -- and, moreover, something presumably 'higher' than (or at least as equally supreme as) God, to which God must conform God's own activity.

Before swinging to the other end of the Euthyphro-inspired alternatives, I will consider a middle path: that the Good is not *completely* external to God. Mark Timmons develops this position “as a way out” for the theist from committing to the view that moral standards wholly depend on God’s commands:

The gist of the solution to the dilemma that I shall propose involves two main claims: (1) The theist should recognize that there is an important sense in which what is right and wrong, good and bad depends on God’s creative choice, and so there is a sense in which morality depends on God. (2) However, the theist should accept the idea that there are basic facts about what is right and wrong, good and bad that are independent of God’s commands (Timmons 2002: 30).

Timmons defends these two claims with the premise that, “[g]iven God’s omnipotence, there are many possible worlds he might have created, much different from the world he did create” (ibid). Given the features of the actual world, there exist certain moral laws – but these might not exist had God’s creation been different. The badness of murder and theft, for instance, depend on the fact that God created a world of beings that are mortal and depend on an environment with limited resources (Timmons 2002: 31). Nevertheless, and given that the world is the way it is, “the truth and correctness” of moral standards in the actual world are independent of God’s commands. Standards of goodness can be external to God to a degree, while their actual existence still depends on God’s will as exercised at the time of creation. In this picture, then, humans praise God in a way that recognizes God as being good to them (via conforming the divine will and action to the True and the Good) given their design. Timmons’ strategy might well serve the aims of the present argument; I think, though, that the third strategy has the most promise.

The third route I consider here is an understanding of the Good as internal to God. To salvage the notion of God as Creator (which the external view threatens), some moral theorists turn to versions of Divine Command Theory: the view that distinctions between right and wrong are real and “rooted in the nature and will of God” (Mortimer 1950, as cited in Timmons 2002: 23). If this were true for God’s performance and character, God’s agency would be strictly *inwardly directed*. According to Divine Command Theory, though, “[God's] commands alone are what *make* actions right or wrong” (Timmons 2002: 28). This construes an asymmetrical relation between God and the Good; in the same way that humans’ very existence depend on

God's will to create them, reasons of the Good depend on God's will to command those reasons. While some theists are comfortable with this view, I find myself with those inclined to reject it. One source of special discomfort is the goodness of God, God's-self. Are we really to believe that God is only good because God *says* God is good? In the face of this obvious concern, among others, I wish to take up a more robust vision of the Good and of God's goodness, while still conceiving reasons of the Good as *internal* to God.

Robert Adams develops a less asymmetrical view of this relationship between the Good and the Divine. He adopts a platonic model for the nature of the Good, with a thesis that identifies God *as the Good*:

God is the Good itself, the definitive standard of excellence, occupying roughly the role assigned to the Form of the Good or the Beautiful in Plato's Republic and Symposium (Adams 2002: 1)

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates recites the wise words of Diotima, which illustrate "the idea of a transcendent Beauty", a standard of all beauty by which "all other beautiful things are beautiful by 'participating' in it (211 B)" (Adams 2002: 2). Diotima conceives interpersonal love and common forms of *eros* as mere steppingstones in an "ascent of desire" (Nussbaum 1979: 144) toward the transcendent, as these sources of admiration cultivate a growing recognition of and appreciation for the *form* of beauty. Plato's writings pursue an understanding of a single exemplar for all earthly sources of good and beauty, conceiving an ultimate form of Excellence, Beauty, or the Good which Judeo-Christian thought seems to adopt:

The Forms, for Plato, have a certain priority. They are the originals, the standard; and in applying such terms as 'equal', 'good', and 'beautiful' to mundane things, the question is to what extent they measure up to the standard. In the same way, theists may say that God is the standard of goodness, to which other good things must in some measure conform, but never perfectly conform. (Adams 2002: 18).

Identifying God with the platonic concept of the Good places God in an interesting position – as both an object of ethical pursuit and as an object of praise. In this picture, God's excellence *provides* the standard of human excellence, while "the excellence of other things consists in a sort of resemblance to God" (Adams 2002: 2).

This view of God as the Good would not only affect our notion of divine agency, but of human agency, too. An 'internal relation' view for God and the Good would be a source of

departure from Wolf's 'outwardly directed' view; at the same time, though, the platonic path toward Excellence does seem to capture something about Wolf-Watsonian ideals of agency, at least on the human level. When free-flowing actions exhibit an enhanced sensitivity to the True and the Good, agents are especially deserving of aretaic praise – a kind of praise that acknowledges the excellences of their character. If we adopt Adams' view, praising God is an act of appreciating the Good itself; meanwhile, praising other humans (in the aretaic sense) can be seen as appreciating their Godlikeness. Adams writes,

Aspiration for a transcendent good is central to both [Platonism and theism], and so is the focus on excellence. Worship, after all, is the acknowledgment, not just of God's benefits to us, but of the supreme degree of intrinsic excellence. (Adams 2002: 2).

Diotima's model of ascent via interpersonal admiration seems to trace a model for aretaic worship and praise. If we grant God *as* the Good, we might understand our ability to recognize and praise others' excellences as part of our own respective paths, to come to understand the transcendent Excellence. Through our "love of ordinary beauties," we come to better recognize and appreciate the exemplar, the Good itself.

Once again, this internal view of the Good runs into tension with the notion of God's perfect rationality. Without any reasons external to God's self, how could there be sufficient reason for all God's actions? As God is no longer distinct from God's own reasons of the Good, it seems our use of the term 'maximally sensitive to reasons' seems to shift. Though God's activity is perfectly aligned with reasons of the Good, it's awkward to imagine God's agency as *responsive* to something God *is*. On the other hand, it could be that we are simply understanding the property of 'perfect rationality' in the wrong way. Perhaps God is perfectly reasonable as the source of all reason – in other words, the exemplar of all things rational. Similarly, we might imagine Picasso's "Guernica" as the perfect version of the "Guernica", though there is no standard of the "Guernica" independent from it. An aspiring artist doesn't hope to perfect the original with their own copy; rather, they hope to imitate what is already perfect, the original itself.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This project began with the puzzle of God's praiseworthiness and, with some resolution, ended in puzzles over how best to understand God's goodness. Nevertheless, the work in between these two sources of discomfort gives us at least some promising reasons for praising an

essentially unsurpassable Being. I attempted to address PAP-style challenges to God's praiseworthiness and responsibility with notions of free agency that do not rely on access to alternatives, provided by Susan Wolf and Gary Watson. As Wolf demonstrates with her Asymmetry Thesis, praiseworthy agency already exhibits a key feature to free agency – the ability to act according to and be governed by the True and the Good. Thus, praiseworthiness does not demand the same control-features that blameworthiness requires and that PAP views demand, via access to alternatives. There was also the worry that the Divine lacks the right kind of agency to be considered *responsible* for their actions. Following Watson's and Eshleman's contributions, I sought to show how God *can* be considered responsible in at least the aretaic sense. Finally, I hoped to demonstrate with this Wolf/Watson-inspired view of *perfect* agency that praiseworthiness for God and praiseworthiness for God's actions collapse into one kind of praise; as God suffers no conflict between internal structures, God serves as an exemplar of virtuous agency – an agent whose acts directly manifest the Goodness of their character.

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