

## **Divine Will Theory: Intentions or Desires?**

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Due largely to the work of Mark Murphy and Philip Quinn, divine will theory has emerged as a legitimate alternative to divine command theory in recent years.<sup>1</sup> As an initial characterization, divine will theory is a view of deontological properties according to which, for instance, an agent S's obligation to perform action A in circumstances C is grounded in God's will that S A in C.<sup>2</sup> Characterized this abstractly, divine will theory does not specify which kind of mental state is supposed to ground S's obligation; it could be God's desires, beliefs, intentions, or emotions. My purpose here is not to challenge this view. Rather, I want to examine the decision by Murphy and Quinn to base their version of divine will theory on God's intentions, and argue that this may have been an unwise move. As an alternative, I suggest that those who are initially attracted to divine will theory would be better served to develop the view with a focus on God's desires rather than intentions.

### **1. Divine Intention Theory**

As far as this paper is concerned, the discussion will be limited just to the deontic status of actions (obligatory, permissible, forbidden), and so no attempt will be made to determine whether axiological properties such as goodness or evil can be accounted for

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<sup>1</sup> See Murphy 1998 and Quinn 2000, 2002. Quinn used to be one of the most prominent advocates of divine command theory, and it was only towards the end of his life that he made the switch to divine will theory. For critical discussion of divine will theory, see Adams 1999: 258-262 and Adams 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy 1998: 16.

as well. In order to get oriented to the range of deontological views in this area, consider the following three rough characterizations:

*Divine Command Theory*: Deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in God's relevant commands.<sup>3</sup>

*Divine Intention Theory*: Deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in God's relevant intentions.<sup>4</sup>

*Divine Desire Theory*: Deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in God's relevant desires.<sup>5</sup>

For divine command theory, God's mental states give rise to his commands, but it is the commands themselves which determine the deontic status of actions. The other two views acknowledge that God's commands play an important *epistemic* role in communicating how human beings are to behave, but it is certain prior mental states themselves, intentions in the one case and desires in the other, which are the metaphysical basis for deontic properties.<sup>6</sup>

Does anything hang on the outcome of the debate between advocates of these three views? While a proper treatment of this question would require a paper in its own right, it seems initially apparent that a great deal does depend on this outcome. Both divine intention and divine desire theory avoid certain serious objections to divine command theory,<sup>7</sup> and in what follows I argue that grounding obligations in divine

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<sup>3</sup> See Quinn 1978 and Adams 1979, 1999, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See Murphy 1998 and Quinn 2000, 2002. Quinn uses the label 'divine intention theory' in his 2000: 57. In the same paper, he also explicitly accepts not just a divine will theory in general but more specifically a divine intention theory as the basis for deontological properties. Thus he writes that "it is the divine intentions lying behind the divine commands that really make a moral difference" (2000: 57).

<sup>5</sup> See my 2008a. To keep things manageable, I have omitted discussion of divine motivation theory, which grounds deontic properties in God's emotions. See Zagzebski 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between these two views rests on the assumption, now widely shared in the action theory literature, that intentions are not reducible to combinations of beliefs and desires. For the leading expression of this assumption, see Bratman 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Divine intention theorists such as Murphy and Quinn have been especially critical of divine command theory in recent years, and I have nothing to offer here in addition to their objections. Rather, I want to only note that their central objections – such as Murphy's trilemma or his 'objectionable contingency' charge – give us good reason to reject divine command theory, but *not* to favor divine intention theory over divine desire theory. In other words, advocates of divine desire theory can readily help themselves to these objections. This includes what I consider to be the simplest and most intuitively compelling concern of all,

intentions is also problematic. Thus divine desire theory may be the most promising place to look of these three views if the theist wants to claim that God is the basis for deontic properties.<sup>8</sup>

Before we see what these alleged difficulties are for divine intention theory (hereafter ‘DIT’), we should note one other feature of the view. As Murphy convincingly argues, if God intends that some state of affairs obtain at time *t*, then it will obtain at *t*.<sup>9</sup> But it follows that if God intends for *S* to act in a certain way at *t*, then *S* will act that way at *t*, and so if moral obligations are supposed to be based on divine intentions they would never be violated. Given the obvious fact that moral obligations are routinely violated, Murphy focuses just on God’s *antecedent* intentions, which take into account all the relevant circumstances an agent is in at the time except for his or her actual choice of which action to perform. Thus God antecedently intends that all humans are saved and that they not murder each other, but by not taking into account their actual choices, these intentions are compatible with either state of affairs *not* obtaining.<sup>10</sup>

I want to suggest in what follows that there are three reasons why antecedent intentions are not the right kind of mental state to ground obligation. The reasons have to do with certain properties of intentions in general, regardless of whether they are antecedent or not, and stem from widely held views in the philosophy of action. To be

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namely that “it is at the deepest level God’s will, and not his commands, which merely express his will, that determines the deontological status of actions” (Quinn 1990: 293).

For Murphy’s trilemma, see Murphy 2002a, 2002b: 82-92, and 2004 and the discussion in Almeida 2004 and Wainwright 2005: 89. For the objectionable contingency charge, see Murphy 1998: 4-7.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, while I mentioned what I take to be the most serious problems for divine command theory in the previous note, limitations of space prevent me from elaborating on them and addressing potential responses by advocates of the view. Thus those who are not already convinced by, for instance, Murphy’s trilemma will not find any additional reasons in this paper to abandon divine command theory. Rather, the paper is aimed at theological voluntarists about deontological properties who have concerns about divine command theory and who are looking for something internal to God’s will as the metaphysical ground for obligation. Thanks to an anonymous referee for help here.

<sup>9</sup> Murphy 1998: 16.

<sup>10</sup> These examples are from *Ibid.*, 18-19.

fair, though, each of these views has been challenged, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to motivate and defend them. Thus I hope to at least illustrate what views advocates of DIT will be forced to adopt in action theory, and leave it up to them to decide whether they are willing to go along with these (in my view implausible) positions. Furthermore, such a result will hopefully motivate the search for another version of divine will theory which does not have to take a stand on controversial views in the philosophy of action.

## **2. First Concern: Intentions and Beliefs**

The first concern for DIT arises because of the frequently made claim in the action theory literature that having a belief of a certain kind is a necessary condition on having an intention. In the first person case, if I intend to do something, then I believe that I will do it. For example, if I intend to go to the gym this afternoon, then I believe that I will go there, and structure the rest of my afternoon around this plan. The same claim applies to intentions *that* some event occur; if I intend that it happen, then I believe that it will.<sup>11</sup>

According to divine intention theory, if God antecedently intends that S A in C, then S is obligated to A in C. But given the above property of intentions, it follows that God believes that S will A in C. And for many free actions, God does not have this belief precisely because S does *not* A in C – instead S murders someone, commits adultery, or tells a lie.<sup>12</sup> Nor would it help to just limit the theory such that God intends that S act in a

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<sup>11</sup> See Chisholm 1970: 646, Audi 1973: 388, Kim 1976, Harman 1976: 432, 1986: chapter eight, Davis 1984: 43-44, and Velleman 1989: 113-121, among many others.

<sup>12</sup> An anonymous referee claims that I am assuming the falsity of open theism. However, the argument here is only committed to the claim that God does *not* have the belief that S will A in C, rather than claiming in

certain way A in C only when God believes that S will A in C. For then it would follow that God cannot intend that S not murder an innocent person when God believes that S *will* murder the person. According to this restricted version of DIT, refraining from murdering the innocent person would not be obligatory, which is absurd.<sup>13</sup>

One response to this line of criticism is to claim that since an *antecedent* intention is supposed to be formed without reference to the actual choice a human agent makes in the circumstances, God will have no idea whether, for instance, S will commit murder in C when he forms an intention for S not to. So he will not form the problematic belief that S will not murder someone in C as a result of forming this intention. But this response will not work. For if it is a necessary truth that an intention about an action entails a belief about that action, then if God does not form a belief at all about whether S will commit the murder, then he cannot intend that S not murder in C. Furthermore, even if God refrains from considering the actual choice S makes in C, God would still know that, given human freedom and S's nefarious character, there is a significant *chance* that S will commit a murder. So again, given the above principle from action theory, his intending S not murder in C is supposed to entail his believing that S will not murder in C, but then how can he form this intention if he believes that there is a good chance S *will*?

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addition that God has the positive belief that S will *not* A in C. And the former is a claim that is clearly compatible with open theism.

<sup>13</sup> The claim that intention entails belief, while perhaps the majority view, has still been met with some criticism, but it is important to note that we could accept a weaker claim and still reject DIT. Michael Bratman, for example, has raised two types of counterexamples against this condition on intentions, and instead argues that intentions “support coordination in part by providing support for expectations that they will be successfully executed” but that so understood they need only be *consistent* with the agent's beliefs (Bratman 1987: 37). But consider his first remark. If I intend to go to the gym this afternoon, this intention supports my expectation that this is where I will be, and helps me plan the rest of my day around this event. Yet how would this work in the case of God? If he antecedently intends that S A in C, then in many cases he is creating false expectations for himself, and his plans for subsequent behavior will be seriously misguided. Note that it is also unclear whether God's antecedent intention that S not murder is even *consistent* with his belief that (let us suppose) S will in fact murder.

To be fair, some philosophers of action also reject even Bratman's weaker version of the relationship between intentions and beliefs. See for instance McCann 1998: chapter 10.

Perhaps the advocate of DIT can maintain that we have been thinking about God's antecedent intentions concerning human behavior in the wrong way. Thus far, we have been interpreting them as *actual* intentions God forms on the basis of less than full information, in particular information about the free choices those creatures actually make. However, there is another interpretation which might help bypass the above objection. On this understanding, antecedent intentions are not actual but *counterfactual* intentions, i.e., what God would intend if he were ignorant of his creatures' actual free choices. Thus it might be true of God in this world that:

- (\*) He would intend S to not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S's free choice in C).

This counterfactual intention would then be God's antecedent intention for S's behavior in C, and hence the ground for his obligation to not murder in C.<sup>14</sup> And, the thought might be, it would *not* obviously follow from (\*) that God *believes* S will not murder anyone in C, which was the problem we saw for DIT above.

Unfortunately, while this may be a more plausible way of thinking about God's antecedent intentions, it does little to assuage our central concern. If as a general matter about intentions it is the case that intending S perform A in C really does entail that the agent believes S will A in C, then given (\*) it would also be true of God that:

- (\*\*) He would believe S *will not* murder anyone in C.

And we are faced with the same problem all over again. For as a matter of fact, God would believe no such thing – it is part of the description of the case that C does not include any mention of what S's free choice is, and so on the basis of C God does not

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this alternative interpretation of antecedent intentions.

know whether S will commit murder or not.<sup>15</sup> Thus varying how we understand the *antecedent* in antecedent intentions does not help here; it is the reliance on *intentions* which is causing the trouble.

### 3. Second Concern: Intentions are Self-Referential

Another, perhaps even more widely accepted claim about intentions is that they are self-referential such that when an agent intends to A or intends that A occur, she represents herself as A-ing or bringing about A *by way of that very intention*.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the mental state causes behavior and represents itself as so causing it. Gilbert Harman provides a nice example of this property of intentions:

Betty intends to kill someone. She aims her gun and, at the crucial moment, a noise startles her, leading her to contract her finger so that she shoots and kills him . . . Although she intends to kill him and does kill him, she does not do what she intends. For her intention to kill him is the intention that that very intention will lead her to pull the trigger at the crucial moment; and that does not happen.<sup>17</sup>

But this feature of intentions makes it highly problematic to think that they could serve as the ground of obligation. For if God antecedently intends that S not murder an innocent person, God represents S's not murdering that person as brought about at least partially

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<sup>15</sup> At best, he might only know that it is *probable* that S will or will not commit murder in C.

Note that the same concern above can be raised if we switch to talking about what God's beliefs in the *actual* world are about his counterfactual intentions. Thus God in the actual world might consider a description of S's circumstances which does not include S's free choice, and form a belief like this:

(B\*) God believes that He would intend S to not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S's free choice in C).

God would also know that as a general matter, intending that S perform A in C entails that the agent believe S will A in C. So God's knowledge of this entailment relation together with (B\*) would lead him to:

(B\*\*) God believes that He would believe S will not murder anyone in C.

And the same problem arises again, since as a matter of fact God would believe no such thing as (B\*\*).

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to distinguish this way of stating the concern from the simpler approach used in the text above.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Harman 1976 and 1986: chapter eight, Searle 1983: chapter three, Pears 1985, Donagan 1987: 88, Velleman 1989: 96-99, 1997, and Ginet 1990: 35-36. For criticisms, see Mele 1992: chapter eleven. One common objection is that young children have intentions but not the concept of intention, and so cannot intend to do something by way of that intention. For a response, see Harman 1976: 441 fn. 5. An anonymous referee suggested that Frankfurt's neuroscientist counterexample to the principle of alternative possibilities might also cause trouble for self-referential views of intentions.

<sup>17</sup> Harman 1976: 445.

by way of that very intention. But why choose a mental state with *this* feature as the centerpiece of a theory of obligation? Why, in other words, not choose a mental state which is concerned with S's not murdering, *irrespective* of whether S's refraining is brought about by one of God's mental states?<sup>18</sup>

A related question concerns what it would take to fully satisfy God's antecedent intentions. In Harman's example, Betty's behavior was not what she intended because it was not brought about by that very intention, but rather by accident.<sup>19</sup> Similarly in the case of omissions, suppose S refrained from murdering an innocent person simply by accident, say because of a nervous twitch or a sudden noise. Then such behavior would *not* fully satisfy God's intention that S not murder that person, since S did not behave even partially by way of that very intention. Yet such an intention is supposed to ground S's obligation to not murder the person, and so the behavior of refraining that S actually exhibited would presumably *not* have been obligatory. But this is clearly absurd – the behavior might not have been praiseworthy since it happened by accident, but it was surely obligatory.

This last point can be taken a step further by noting that typically formulations of the self-referentiality of intentions actually build into the *content* of the intention that action A occur by way of that very intention.<sup>20</sup> If such an intention directly grounds an

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, its' being partially brought about by God's intention rather than entirely on the agent's own initiative arguably could be said to lessen the praiseworthiness of the action, although I will not pursue the issue further here.

<sup>19</sup> I call what Betty's did her 'behavior' as it did not amount to a full blown intentional action or product of her agency, but rather merely consisted of a sudden bodily movement. The same applies in the example of an omission which follows. For more on the difference between mere behavior and full blown human action, see Velleman 1992. I relax this distinction and tend to use 'behavior' and 'action' interchangeably in the other sections of the paper.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Harman 1976: 441, 452, and Velleman 1989: 96. For an exception, see Donagan 1987: 158 and the discussion in Mele 1992: 205-206. Thus following Donagan a more modest version of the self-referentiality claim might have it that third person intentions to act be understood *de re* rather than *de dicto*,



obligation, then it would seem that the content of that obligation would include that A has to occur by way of that very intention. Indeed, according to DIT, *all* obligations are grounded in divine intentions, and so all of them would have this self-referential clause. And so no human actions not performed at least partially by way of divine intentions would ever be obligatory.

Note that the concern developed in this section has nothing to do with the two competing interpretations of antecedent intentions we saw previously, i.e., whether they are actual intentions or merely counterfactual intentions that God has concerning human actions. Suppose we adopt the latter approach and use our same example from section two:

- (\*) He would intend S to not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S's free choice in C).

But given the general self-referential nature of intentions, (\*) could be stated more fully as:

- (~) He would intend S to not murder anyone in C by way of this very intention.

And on this interpretation of antecedent intentions, such an intention would be the basis for S's obligation to not murder anyone in C, thereby giving rise to the same questions we saw before.<sup>21</sup>

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such that (for instance) S intends, of his intention to A, that it result in his A-ing. Note, though, that such a proposal, even if promising, does not avoid the questions raised earlier in this section.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly as we did in the previous section, we could develop this concern in terms of God's *beliefs* in the actual world about what he would intend. Using our same example, it might be true of God in this world that:

- (B\*) God believes that He would intend S to not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S's free choice in C).

But given God's awareness of the self-referential nature of intentions, the content of this belief would more fully be represented as:

- (B~) God believes that He would intend S to not murder anyone in C by way of this very intention.

And again the same concern would arise.

Thus in this second, very different respect, the decision to make intentions the heart of divine will theory invites serious concerns for advocates of the view.

#### **4. Third Concern: Intending Others to Act**

Talk of intending something in cases concerning an agent's own present or future directed actions is familiar. Such talk often becomes much more strained when it concerns the actions of others, such as God's intentions for human beings. Indeed, some action theorists have gone so far as to say that:

An agent can intend only to do something *herself*.<sup>22</sup>

The proper objects of intending . . . seem limited to my actions (not the sun's) and to things I can do.<sup>23</sup>

However, these claims seem implausible. If I am a powerful king with many obedient servants, it seems perfectly intelligible for me to say that I can intend that my servants do various things to meet my needs. Instead, more plausible and more widely accepted are remarks like these:

[O]ne cannot intend what one does not take oneself to control.<sup>24</sup>

One person can decide or plan the behavior of a group for example, if he holds authority or control over the behavior of people other than himself. . . . If I am to settle the matter [by forming an intention], I cannot think of you as having settled it first or as being in a position to settle it later; whereas if I am to leave you to settle it, I must not preempt you by settling it myself.<sup>25</sup>

Thus I cannot intend that the Queen of England give me all her jewels, but the Queen can intend that her servant prepare her dinner tonight.

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<sup>22</sup> Stoutland 1997: 55, emphasis his.

<sup>23</sup> Baier 1970: 649.

<sup>24</sup> Baier 1997: 25.

<sup>25</sup> Velleman 1997: 205. See also Harman: "One cannot intend that something will happen if one thinks that whether it will happen or not is entirely outside of one's control" (1976: 452). Robert Adams briefly mentions a similar constraint on third person intentions when discussing DIT in his 2002: 484.

These claims about third person intentions and control are easily misinterpreted.<sup>26</sup> Certainly the Queen can intend for her servant to bring dinner and yet have the servant end up disobeying her. But if her servant had been perfectly reliable up until this point, then all this example shows is that the Queen's intention was not carried out, not that she was doing something improper in forming it in the first place. It would be a different matter altogether if she had known that this particular servant rarely follows her orders; then in that case her intending him to do something would not be in order.

But does not the mere fact that the servant could disobey show that he does not lack free will and hence that the Queen does not have control over him, even if she intends for him to make her dinner? Admittedly, *qua* human agent, he might still have robust capacities for free will. But *qua* obedient servant, he has submitted himself to the control of the Queen. His will is to do what she intends for him to do, and so if he intentionally disobeys her order, then his disobedience does not stem from his being a faithful servant; indeed, it undermines that role. So in intending that the servant obey her requests, the Queen is taking herself to control his behavior when it comes to certain tasks, and if he is behaving *qua* obedient servant, he will have his relevant actions be controlled by her.

If these claims about third person intentions and control are correct, then they cause trouble for the relationship between God and free human beings once we accept divine intention theory. More specifically, if God's third person intentions are supposed to ground obligations for human beings, then given the above, it follows that God must take himself to control all relevant human actions. And God is not one to make mistakes,

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<sup>26</sup> By 'third person intentions' in this section, I mean intentions an agent has regarding the behavior of one or more other agents (regardless of whether the contents of those intentions are strictly speaking framed in the second or third person).

so if he *takes* himself to control these actions, then he really *does* control them; unlike in the case of the Queen's servant, there is no room for God to be mistaken about whether he actually does control his creatures or not. And yet if he does control their actions, they are not free. So either God would not form these third person intentions concerning human actions in the first place, or if he does, the relevant behavior would not be free.

It might be thought that the example of the Queen and her loyal servant could be used by the advocate of DIT to avoid this concern.<sup>27</sup> For by analogy, perhaps we are 'servants' in relation to God given that he created us and continually sustains us on a daily basis. In that case, it would be consistent with the nature of third person intentions for God to form such mental states given his position of authority and control over us.

But this analogy only works in the case of a human being who has become a faithful believer in God and so, like the Queen's servant, has submitted his will to God's will. This person is then under the control of God in such a way that third person intentions concerning his or her actions would be legitimate. But needless to say, many human beings have not become faithful believers, and yet their actions are still morally forbidden, permissible, or obligatory. If third person intentions cannot apply in these cases because the control condition is not met, then DIT has nothing to say about the morality of their actions and hence the view would be seriously incomplete. In fact, the appropriate analogy to the relationship between God and certain nonbelievers would be, for instance, that of a Queen forming present directed intentions for the behavior of a person in a distant country who is completely ignorant of her existence, or for an anarchist in her own country who is trying to overthrow her government. Such intentions would be inappropriate, if not absurd.

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<sup>27</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

Another way of approaching the problem raised in this section is to note that intentions *settle* what it is that I or others are going to do. This is clear in the first person case – forming the intention to spend the afternoon in the gym settles in my mind what I am going to do this afternoon. And it is also clear in the third person case when there is control over someone else; the queen can settle what an obedient servant is going to do by intending that he do it. But it does not make sense to say that God’s intentions could settle how human beings are going to freely behave, unless they happen to have given their (free) wills over to God, which many have not.<sup>28</sup>

Does this discussion neglect the focus of DIT on *antecedent* intentions? Consider our first interpretation of these intentions as actual third person intentions, such as the following:

- (^) God intends that S not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S’s free choice in C).

If the claim from action theory is correct that one cannot legitimately intend what one does not take oneself to control, then God will also have the following belief:

- (^^) God believes that He controls whether S murders anyone in C.

So clearly this interpretation will not help the advocate of DIT. But the same is true for the counterfactual interpretation of antecedent intentions, where we find our familiar example again:

- (\*) He would intend S to not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S’s free choice in C).

Given (\*) and the control condition on third person intentions, it would also be true of God that:

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<sup>28</sup> For more on intentions settling questions about action, see Harman 1976: 438, Bratman 1987: 16, 1999, McCann 1991: 197, and Velleman 1997.

(%) He would believe that He controls whether S murders anyone in C.

But clearly God would have no such belief, at least not if S is a genuinely free human agent and one who has not subsumed his will entirely to God's will. So once again the problem here has nothing to do with how we understand antecedent intentions.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that not all action theorists accept the control condition on third person intentions. In a recent paper, for example, Michael Bratman has not only rejected this condition but replaced it with an alternative prediction condition of his own.<sup>30</sup> On this view, a person can intend that another behave in a certain way provided only that he can reliably predict how the other person will behave in part as a result of that intention. Such a prediction concerns a free action performed by the other person, and so does not require that I control him or her.

Note, though, that even if Bratman is correct, this proposal is of no help to the advocate of DIT, since for many agents and their actions God would reliably predict (and indeed know) that they would *not* do what God intends that they do. And even if he is supposed to abstract from the agent's free choices in forming an antecedent intention, God could still predict that, given the character and psychological makeup of someone like Hitler or Stalin, it is *very likely* that such a person would act in a way that God might otherwise antecedently intend for him not to do. Thus even Bratman's weaker condition

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<sup>29</sup> Once again we can also present this concern in terms of God's beliefs in the actual world about his counterfactual intentions. In our example, suppose that:

(B\*) God believes that He would intend S to not murder anyone in C (given a description of C which does not include S's free choice in C).

From this belief and the control condition on third person intentions, God would also form this mental state:

(B%) God believes that He would believe He controls whether S murders anyone in C.

And the same concern arises again.

<sup>30</sup> See Bratman 1999.

on third person intentions does not avoid the problem for divine intention theory that has been raised in this section.

## 5. Divine Desire Theory

Once again, these three concerns for DIT are not decisive. Each of them rests on a view in the philosophy of action which, although widely held and in my view defensible, could be rejected. It would be nice, however, if there were another version of divine will theory which avoids having to take a stand in the first place on these claims in action theory while also inheriting the same advantages that DIT has when compared to divine command theory.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere I have elaborated and defended just such a theory, which I call ‘divine desire theory.’<sup>32</sup> In this section, I offer a broad outline of the view, and then note why it avoids the three concerns raised for DIT. Of course, even if this view is coherent and immune to those concerns, it will likely give rise to unique ones of its own. I have tried my best to anticipate and respond to potential objections in other work, and so will not take the time to consider them again here. Instead my main aim in this section is to show that a viable alternative to DIT exists which still captures much of the spirit of that view while avoiding the problems raised above.

Divine desire theory or ‘DDT’ is committed to the following claim about obligation:

- (O) Human agent S’s performing action A in circumstances C is obligatory if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S’s freely A-ing in C, God desires that S freely A in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S’s obligation to A in C is this desire.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For more on this last point, see footnote seven.

<sup>32</sup> See my 2008a. This section draws extensively from the presentation of divine desire theory in that paper.

<sup>33</sup> Note that (O) is stated in terms of God’s desire that an agent perform a particular action, and not in terms of God’s desire that *it be morally obligatory that* the agent perform the action. For reasons in favor of rejecting the latter option, see Murphy 1998: 10-16.

Suppose, for example, that it is obligatory for me as I walk past a shallow pond to rush in and save a drowning child. Then according to (O), what grounds this obligation is God's desire towards my saving the child. Indeed we can suppose that given the circumstances, he is also averse towards my doing anything else that I could freely do at that moment, although strictly speaking according to (O) that aversion does not serve as the basis for the obligation.

Clearly, (O) will need some additional explication. Let us take the central concepts in turn:

*Reasons.* The reasons in question are *motivating reasons*, or considerations in the light of which an agent deliberates, decides, and intentionally acts.<sup>34</sup> From the first person perspective, motivating reasons are taken by an agent to be *good* reasons for action, and by the agent's own lights they can serve to justify not only the performance of an action, but also the formation of the mental states deemed necessary for so acting. On my view, and following a common theme in the recent literature, a person's motivating reasons are to be found in the contents of intentional mental states had by him or her. By 'mental

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In addition, it is important to note that (O) is not intended as a thesis specifically about *moral* obligations. Part of my hesitancy about restricting (O) just to moral obligation is that I do not know of any precise way of delimiting moral from non-moral obligations, and the same is true of moral versus non-moral reasons. Hence I want to leave it open as to the kinds of reasons and desires that God might have; in some cases, he might form a desire that I perform an action on the basis of purely prudential reasons (such as his desire that I call the hospital when I am having a heart attack), while in other cases he might form a desire that I act in a certain way based solely on moral considerations (such as his desire that I save a drowning child). But I have nothing to offer in order to restrict the reasons, desires, and obligations in (O) in some meaningful way only to the moral domain.

Given the above paragraph, an anonymous referee asks why DDT should be taken to be superior to rival, non-theistic accounts of prudential obligation (in cases where, e.g., God's relevant desires are based on purely prudential reasons) and of our all-things considered obligations. This is certainly a fair question, but as noted in section one of the paper, my much more modest goal here is to simply outline DDT as a legitimate alternative view of obligation which deserves to be taken seriously by philosophers already working within a framework which grounds deontic properties in something about God.

<sup>34</sup> For a similar characterization, see Dancy 2000: 1 and Setiya 2003: 346-347.



states' I mean pairs of mental attitudes and contents such as my belief that *p*, your desire that *q*, and her wish that *r*. Believing, desiring, wishing, and the like are mental attitudes directed at intentional mental contents, in this case *p*, *q*, and *r*. So on this view, an agent's motivating reasons are not his beliefs, desires, wishes, or mental states more generally, but rather the *contents* of at least some of those mental states, which are intentional mental representations of putative facts in the world, representations which are typically propositional in form.<sup>35</sup> So if I believe that there is widespread starvation in Iceland, one of my motivating reasons for donating to famine relief in Iceland can be the propositional content of that belief, namely *there is widespread starvation in Iceland*, even if this belief is *false* and there is in fact almost no starvation in Iceland.

Arguing for this view would take us too far afield, and fortunately others have already done so persuasively.<sup>36</sup> So let us assume that something like this rough picture of motivating reasons is true in the human case. Now it is always a danger to extrapolate from facts about human psychology to putative facts about God's mind; indeed it is not even clear that God forms mental states or acts for reasons in any way resembling our doing so. However, since the rival views to DDT mentioned at the start of this paper also freely appeal to claims about God's psychological life, DDT at least will not be any worse off in this respect. So returning to (O), the assumption is that some if not all of God's desires are formed for reasons.<sup>37</sup> Suppose, for example, that God strongly desires that I not torture a dog. Some of his motivating reasons could be the contents of divine beliefs, such as *that action would cause pain to the dog* or *there are many other free*

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<sup>35</sup> 'Typically' because there may be intentional mental states with non-propositional intentional objects. Searle, for example, thinks that this is true for states of love. See his 1983: 6-7 and 2001: 36.

<sup>36</sup> I develop the view at length in my 2008b. See also Dancy 2000, Setiya 2003, and Davis 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Linda Zagzebski has argued that some of God's desires might not be based on reasons. See her 2004: 267-268.

*actions he could perform that do not involve torture.* Other reasons might be the objects of prior divine desires, such as *that there be less pain in the world* or *that animals not suffer.* And still other motivating reasons could be the contents of divine emotions, such as *that action is not loveable* or *that action is cruel.*

It is worth considering in a bit more detail what is involved in the reasons God uses in forming a desire about a particular action I might perform. These reasons have three main properties: they are factual considerations, they have valences, and they have weights. First, given God's omniscience, he would know all the factual considerations relevant to my action, such as exactly how much pain would be caused to the dog if I tortured it. These facts may themselves be non-normative,<sup>38</sup> but on the basis of his character, God would assign a *valence* to each fact such that it is either a reason *for* the action, a reason *against* the action, or a fact that is neutral with respect to the action. Finally and again on the basis of his character, he would assign different *weights* or degrees of importance to different considerations. The consideration *that the action would cause the dog to suffer* would be a fact with a far more negative valence, presumably, than the fact *that the action would cause my character to become more vicious.* So when formed on the basis of reasons, a divine desire about a particular human action will always appropriately reflect all the factual considerations God deems to be relevant, as well as the valences and weights he assigns to those facts.

*Desires.* As we have seen, according to DDT what grounds an obligation for a human being to act in a certain way is a particular divine *desire* formed on the basis of the relevant reasons. For our purposes here, we can just treat 'desires' in (O) as the folk

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<sup>38</sup> Although they need not be. The fact *that causing this amount of pain to the dog is bad*, is a fact with moral content.

psychological states with a world-to-mind direction of fit which are to be understood narrowly as being distinct from intentions, wishes, and emotions.<sup>39</sup>

A question that naturally arises about (O) is what we should make of the possibility that, for a particular agent and a given set of circumstances, God has multiple desires directed at different free actions. Perhaps God desires that I volunteer at a church, but perhaps he also desires that in those same circumstances I make a donation to charity. If such a state of affairs is possible, (O) is in trouble, since then I would have multiple obligations which are impossible for me to fulfill simultaneously in the circumstances, and so performing either of these actions, or any other for that matter, would be wrong.<sup>40</sup>

In response, I want to suggest that when it comes to the divine desires which ground a human being's obligations, it is plausible to think that God forms only *one* such desire about a certain action for me to perform in circumstances C, provided that he is not indifferent towards any of the actions I could freely carry out in C.<sup>41</sup> To see this, I first assume that the following principle is true:

(R) Only God's desires concerning free human actions which are formed on the basis of his assessment of *all* (rather than just *some*) of the relevant reasons for action in the

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<sup>39</sup> It has become customary in the action theory literature to distinguish between wide and narrow conceptions of desire. For more, Smith 1994 and Schueler 1995.

An anonymous referee objected that a divine *wish* theory might have an advantage over a divine *desire* theory here if we grant that God has foreknowledge of free actions. The idea is that if God knows ahead of time what you are freely going to do, then it does not make any sense for God to desire for you to, say, refrain from performing that action since such a desire would be futile. Rather, he would simply wish that you had not chosen to perform it in the first place.

However, it seems that the advocate of DDT can take a page out of Murphy's use of antecedent intentions and simply appeal here to antecedent desires – roughly, desires of the kind specified in (O) which do *not* take into account the agent's actual free choice of which action to perform.

<sup>40</sup> Note that this example is not intended to be a special case which we might be tempted on independent grounds to understand as a moral dilemma (such as Sophie's choice or Abraham's sacrifice). If it were a special case, then perhaps such a consequence of (O) would not be troublesome. But the example is intended to be an ordinary case in which we would never think that any of the actions would be wrong. For a related concern, see Murphy 1998: 17.

<sup>41</sup> This claim is compatible with God's forming multiple desires pertaining to which actions to *not* perform in C. It is also a claim about *unconditional* desires, and so is compatible with God's forming multiple conditional desires pertaining to the same agent and circumstances, i.e., that the agent perform certain acts as opposed to others if he happens to not perform the action that God unconditionally desires for him to do.

circumstances can ground deontic properties pertaining to those actions.<sup>42</sup> For instance, if God's desire that S freely A in C grounds his obligation to do so, then that desire is based on God's assessment of all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C.

Now suppose one of my free actions, such as donating to charity, is favored more so by the balance of reasons than any other of my potential actions in C. And suppose that God as a result desires that I freely make the donation, thereby rendering it obligatory. It follows from (O) that my volunteering at a church in the same circumstances would only be obligatory as well if it were grounded in God's desire that I do so. But given (R), such a desire would have to be based on God's assessment of the very same reasons used in forming the first desire. And so why would God also form this all-things considered desire that I volunteer, since by hypothesis making the donation is the action in C that is *best* supported by the reasons? In other words, why would God also want me to do something in C which is such that, were I to do it, I would be objectively irrational for doing so?<sup>43</sup>

Clearly much more needs to be said about (R) and the general relationship between God's desires concerning free human actions and the formation of those desires on the basis of reasons. A more detailed discussion will have to be reserved for another occasion, but as Jon Kvanvig has helpfully pointed out to me, two important concerns are worth addressing here. First, God knows which actions I will freely perform, and so even if I am not going to do what he would ultimately like for me to freely do in the circumstances, he might still desire that I make the best of the bad situation I am going to get myself into. To use Kvanvig's example, he might desire that I not steal in C, but

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<sup>42</sup> The deontic properties here are intended to only be *ultima facie* rather than *prima facie* properties. For how divine desire theory might go about explaining this distinction, see my 2008a.

<sup>43</sup> Note that two actions could be favored to the *same* extent by the relevant reasons, and more so than any other actions I could do in C. But this does not militate in favor of God's forming two desires; rather, he could for instance just form the desire that I *either* freely make a donation in C or freely volunteer at a church in C.

know that I am in fact freely going to do so. Given this knowledge, he might desire that I at least freely steal from those who are not going to suffer from the loss. And it might seem as if principle (R) cannot allow for this desire to ground an obligation to steal.

In response, we can note that nothing about the discussion in the text above rules out God's forming *conditional* desires, such as that I freely steal from those who will not suffer, *if* I freely decide to steal in the first place. That desire in turn could ground a conditional obligation of the form: I ought to freely steal from those who will not suffer, if I freely decide to steal in the first place. And given God's knowledge that I *will* steal, he could form the desire that I freely steal from those who will not suffer, thereby grounding the corresponding obligation.<sup>44</sup>

The second concern is that (R) may not be able to explain how God can experience regret about certain actions. To again make use of another of Kvanvig's helpful examples, God presumably felt regret about the need for the crucifixion, and Jesus wanted to escape the cup in the garden prior to his death. The more general worry

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<sup>44</sup> It might seem as if this proposal implies that I would have contradictory obligations in C. For on the one hand, we said that God desires that I not freely steal in C, which on DDT makes it the case that:

(i) I ought not freely steal in C.

But it seems as if we have now said that, given his foreknowledge, God comes to desire that I freely steal in C from those who will not suffer, which on DDT makes it the case that:

(ii) I ought to freely steal in C from those who will not suffer.

And (i) and (ii) are clearly contradictory obligations.

In response, we can note that (ii) should really have been stated as follows:

(ii\*) I ought to freely steal in C\* from those who will not suffer.

where circumstances C\* are the same as C *plus* the additional fact that I have already freely decided to steal from someone. Clearly there is no contradiction between (ii\*) and (i).

To motivate this response, suppose that I am a ruthless dictator and have the power to steal from anyone in my country. One day I am contemplating whether to steal from my subjects, and let the circumstances I am now in be circumstances C. God might desire that I not freely steal in C from anyone, which would ground (i). However, I do in fact freely arrive at the decision to steal from someone in my country. Then this is an additional fact that needs to be added to the prior circumstances C to give us C\* (I assume here that 'circumstances' are not just limited to states of affairs external to the agent, but also include facts about the agent's nature, past, health, and so forth). And God might form a desire in favor of my stealing in C\* from those who will not suffer once I have already made up my mind to steal in the first place.

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out to me this potential objection to the proposal in the text above.

here is whether (R) is compatible with the claim that in cases of conflicting reasons, the reasons for the outweighed option are still genuine and in some cases very powerful considerations by the agent's own lights.

One response might be to challenge the details of the particular examples. For instance, the traditional view of Jesus' temptation in the garden is that only his *human* nature strongly desired to avoid death, whereas there was no conflict in his divine nature. However, there is no need to put too much weight on the treatment of particular cases, since there is also a general response to this second concern. God's desire in (R) concerning S's free action is God's *all-things considered* desire which is formed on the basis of his assessing all the relevant reasons. As we noted earlier in this section, those reasons are the intentional contents of standing mental states in God's mind, and so could be the objects of certain deeply held desires, beliefs, and emotions that he has. Thus even if some of those reasons happen to be outweighed in light of the valences and weights God has assigned to other considerations, they are no less real and potentially phenomenologically powerful for being outweighed. As such, they can serve as the basis for experiences of psychological tension and regret. So just as a soldier might go off to war while being conflicted about leaving his family and regretting the existence of the war in the first place, so too may God desire (all-things considered) to endure the crucifixion while also feeling the force of a strong desire not to die and lamenting the extent of sin in the world.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This second concern does rightly highlight the importance of distinguishing between a desire God might have for my behavior in C which only stems from a single reason or narrow set of reasons, and an all-things considered desire God might have for my behavior which stems from his assessment of the entire array of relevant reasons. Thus God could desire that I not tell a lie based solely on considerations having to do with truth-telling, but desire overall that I lie so as to save a thousand people from certain death. It is only the second kind of desire which is crucial to (R) and to the way that principle is used in this section.

*Freely.* It is plausible to think that given God's omnipotence, for any state of affairs not involving free actions, if God desires that it obtain, then it will obtain. Indeed, such a claim is likely to be necessarily true. But clearly if *all* of God's desires were like this, then there would never be noncompliance with any obligations grounded in such desires, which is absurd. Hence by specifying that God desires that S *freely* A in C, thesis (O) implies that God's desire will only be satisfied in the event of this particular creature's exercising his or her own free will in choosing A.

*Grounds.* Thus far little has been said about the sense in which divine desires might 'ground' deontological properties. This is intentional, as there are a number of proposals one could make, and advocates of DDT can plausibly develop the view in a variety of directions. More specifically, we can distinguish at least four different proposals:

Meaning Equivalence: The best conceptual analysis of 'A is obligatory for me' is 'God desires that I A.'

Casual Grounding: God's desiring that I A is a causally necessary and sufficient condition for A's being obligatory for me.

Identity: Its being obligatory for me to do A is identical to God's desiring that I A.

Non-Reductive Constitution: A's being obligatory for me is constituted by but not identical to God's desiring that I A. There is an asymmetrical dependency relation between the two.<sup>46 47</sup>

It is important to note that merely postulating a bi-conditional between obligation and divine desires (as is done in the first sentence of (O)) is not sufficient for rendering DDT a distinctive position, as nothing would thereby be indicated about the dependence

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<sup>46</sup> Simply calling this relation a supervenience relation would not be sufficient to properly distinguish the view since identity is also a supervenience relation. For this point in the context of discussing divine command theory, see Almeida 2004.

<sup>47</sup> These four characterizations are just intended to be crude initial statements of the proposals. For similar surveys of such options for both divine command and divine intention theories, see Wierenga 1983, Quinn 2000: 54-55, and Murphy 2002b: chapter four.

relation between the two. Indeed, an advocate of divine *command* theory could accept this claim and still hold that what actually ground obligations are divine commands not divine desires. Hence a fully developed version of DDT also needs an account of the grounding relation between the relevant divine desires and deontological properties, and relations of causal dependence, identity, or non-reductive constitution are likely going to be the most popular options. Meaning equivalence proposals, on the other hand, since they are not making metaphysical but rather just conceptual claims, are not directly relevant to the concerns of this paper.

Finally, (O) specifies that God's desire "directly" grounds S's obligation. This is intended to block the possibility that God's desire that S freely A in C might cause the formation of something else, such as an intention or belief, which itself is the immediate and direct ground of S's obligation in C.<sup>48</sup>

*Other Deontic Categories.* Divine desire theory can be developed to include forbidden and permissible actions as well:

- (F) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is forbidden if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S refrain from freely A-ing in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to refrain from A-ing in C is this desire.
- (P) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is permissible if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God neither desires that S freely A in C nor desires that S refrain from freely A-ing in C.

Here the permissible is treated as exclusive of both the obligatory and the forbidden, rather than just as the set of those actions which are not forbidden. If an action is one

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<sup>48</sup> In order to simplify the presentation, I have omitted other potential properties of this grounding relation, such as totality, exclusivity, activity, and necessity. For discussion of these properties, see Quinn 2000: 55.



about which God is indifferent, neither desiring that I perform it nor that I refrain from performing it, then according to (P) it is merely permissible.<sup>49</sup>

Suppose then that DDT is a coherent and viable alternative to DIT. We can end this section by noting that DDT does not give rise to any of the three concerns raised in this paper for the latter view. First of all, there is no analogous connection between desires and beliefs as there is between intentions and beliefs.<sup>50</sup> I might desire to do something without believing that I will, and I can have desires which are inconsistent (in a suitably loose sense of consistency) with my beliefs. Secondly, it should be apparent that, unlike intentions, desires are not self-referential since they do not require that actions which they motivate be done by way of those very desires.<sup>51</sup> And thirdly, the conditions on properly desiring that someone else perform an action do not include taking oneself to control his or her behavior; someone might desire that a robber not take his possessions, or that a relative not be mentally ill, or that there be peace between warring countries, without having any means of bringing about those events.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that there is a strong *prima facie* case for thinking that there are perfectly general properties of intentions which make them ill-suited to serve the role that divine intention theory has set out for them. Of course, all three properties of intentions suggested above could be challenged, and indeed have been so in the literature. But it would be nice to have on hand a version of divine will theory which does not force

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<sup>49</sup> This framework might seem to not leave any room for some actions' being supererogatory, a challenge which I take up in my 2008a.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., Harman 1976: 432 and McCann 1991: 199.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., Harman 1976: 445.

the theist to take such highly controversial positions in the philosophy of action, and I have suggested that divine desire theory is one such view.<sup>52</sup>

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