A Complementary Convergence of Divine Command Theory and Divine Motivation Theory in order to Maintain the Traditional View of God's Sovereignty and to Better Understand His Character

[E]thics is fundamentally theological. That is, ethical issues are at every point related to God—to his character, his will, his actions, and his purpose.[1]
Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*

Of the two main kinds of divine commands—voluntarist and nonvoluntarist—I expound on the former in order to maintain the traditional view of God's sovereignty and to better understanding his character vis-à-vis divine command ethics. Voluntarist commands are the sole product of the will of God.[2] In this sense, divine will manifested through divine power defines goodness. Therefore, even if God commands us to do something that seems immoral to us, it is still good because God commanded it. And, thus, we should obey it blindly. However, to assume that God commands from his will as if somehow it were detached from his loving nature is to make the same mistake the ancients made long ago.

The classical Greek matrix of holiness (goodness) is expressed in one of the two horns of a classic moral dilemma called Euthyphro's Dilemma. In one of Plato's early dialogues, *Euthyphro*, Socrates inquires of Euthyphro, a religious expert on the subject of holiness, why holiness is loved by the gods: either holiness is holy because it is loved by the gods or it is loved by the gods because it is holy.[3] A Christianized translation could be restated as: either goodness is good because God commanded it

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[1] Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 23.

[2] OT ethics is not only deontologically motivated via voluntarist divine commands, it is also filled with virtue ethics via involuntarist divine commands. In correspondence, Charry explains, "I am seeing a virtue ethics in the OT and that has been unnoticed because voluntarist divine command theory became an unquestioned assumption in the middle ages." (Ellen T. Charry, April 20, 2018, e-mail message to author).

[3] Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues*, gen. ed. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 9.

or God commanded it because it is good. The first horn of the dilemma is morally problematic because holiness (or goodness) turns out to be arbitrary. Here holiness is synonymous with whatever God commands, and his commands should be obeyed because he is all-powerful. In other words, divine might makes right. Socrates/Plato sides with the second horn of the dilemma: holiness is loved by the gods because it is holy. This implies that holiness is separate or independent from the gods. That is, holiness is an eternal moral truth that the gods can choose to abide by or ignore. For Christianity, this could prove to be problematic since traditionally God is viewed as the ultimate paradigm of goodness or the master (standard) of goodness, not its servant.[4] We do ourselves a great service to remember to "[g]ive thanks to the LORD, for *He is good*; His faithful love endures forever" (Pss 107:1; 136:1; 118:1, HCSB, emphases added. See also Pss 25:8-10; 34:8).

(Modified) Divine Command Theory

Robert Adams moves us in the direction of a meta-ethical[5] solution to this either/or fallacy. Adams writes, "My new divine command theory of the nature of ethical wrongness . . . is that ethical wrongness *is* (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God."[6] Put positively, ethical rightness is identical to the property of being in favor of the commands of a loving God. His theory could also be proposed to include obligation to divine commands in the

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[4] This view that "eternal moral truths that God did not create and that are valid for God as well as for us" is called intellectualism (or Socratic intellectualism) because God's commands "come from his intellect's knowledge of these truths." Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 185.

The problem with intellectualism is fourfold: (1) the doctrine of theology proper throughout ecclesiastical history, which deals with the foundation of moral values (meta-ethics), has been an anti-intellectualism of either voluntarism or non-voluntarism; (2) anti-intellectualism throughout the centuries holds that God's essential characteristics or nature is simple and not composed of parts. But intellectualism makes reason an essential divine characteristic, while goodness is non-essential. This rationalistic impulse to compartmentalize God's "head" (reason) from his "heart" (goodness) is problematic to historical Judeo-Christianity. (3) Intellectualism makes God dependent on eternal moral truths, which implies that God lacks transcendent goodness; and (4) from (3) we are left with a conundrum: on the one hand, if God lacks an essential characteristic, such as goodness, then he is not a maximally great being, and thus, he does not deserve to be worshipped. On the other hand, if God seeks to be good, then that is a good moral choice, which means that God has to already be good before he chooses *goodness*. But God cannot be both non-good and good, simultaneously. How can God make a good free will choice to consistently seek eternal moral truths and also be non-moral? The act of seeking is itself an act of good will.

[5] The difference between the moral categories of ethics and meta-ethics is that the former addresses how we ought to live and behave, while the latter addresses what grounds ethical behavior.

[6] Robert Merrihew Adams, "A New Divine Command Theory," in *Ethical Theories: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, [2007] 2009), 245 (emphasis in the original).

following manner: "An act is morally required (a duty) just in case God commands us to do it; an act is morally wrong just in case God forbids us to do it."[7] For Adams "the actual command . . . creates the obligation."[8] To explain his main thesis, Adams argues that divine *commands* are based on a theory of revelation—the *revealed* will of God. He makes an important distinction, however, between "the absolute will of God (his 'good pleasure') and his revealed will."[9] God, in his absolute will, sometimes decides for reasons mysterious to us to allow for, say, the consequences of ethical wrongness to affect innocent people. But it is "God's *revealed* will—not [necessarily] what he wants or plans to have happen, but what he has told us to do—that is thought to determine the rightness and wrongness of human actions."[10] So he grounds divine commands on the revealed will of God. It behooves us to recollect what scripture has already revealed about God: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, NIV). And so Adams argues that "…ethical wrongness *is* (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a **loving** God."[11] One might strengthen the argument by saying something like ethical wrongness is the property of being contrary to the commands of a God, who is love (or the ultimate standard of love). That way, God is not only loving, he, himself, is the epitome of what it means to love.

So divine commands supervene on both the (revealed) will and (loving) nature of God.[12] David Horner, in his article, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Why Christian Ethics Should be Eudaimonistic," agrees. He writes in detail why biblical ethics supervene on both the nature and will of God.

I quote him at length below:

My view is that biblical ethics is grounded in both the nature and will of God. First, in the *nature* of God: God is personal, and thus biblical ethics is ultimate[l]y a character- or virtue-ethic. Human beings bear the image of God, and are called—post fall, God's covenant people are explicitly called— to become like him, to imitate him in their character and behavior—the *imago*

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[7] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258.

[8] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 259.

[9] Robert Merrihew Adams, "A New Divine Command Theory," in *Ethical Theories: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, [2007] 2009), 245.

[10] Robert Merrihew Adams, "A New Divine Command Theory," in *Ethical Theories: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, [2007] 2009), 245 (emphasis in the original.

[11] Robert Merrihew Adams, "A New Divine Command Theory," in *Ethical Theories: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, [2007] 2009), 245 (bold emphasis added).

[12] These are metaphysically necessary. That is, it cannot be false in any possible world if it is true in the actual world that divine commands are grounded in the (revealed) will and (loving) nature of God. With that said, however, I do not claim to be giving an exhaustive set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.

Dei and the *imitatio Dei* (*imago Christi* and *imitatio Christi*).[13] One deeply important reason for the law, God's commands in Scripture, is to guide God's people in this. The theme of the book of Leviticus, one of the chief sources of ceremonial, judicial, and moral law (including the command to love your neighbor as yourself—19.18), is *holiness*, which is a character trait most fundamentally. The point of the laws, as repeatedly stated in the book, is for God's people as a nation to reflect his character of holiness: 'Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy' (19.2).

Second, biblical ethics is also grounded in the *will* of God. This is emphasized by deontological, 'divine command' Christian ethics. But God's will is expressed first, not in his *command*, but in his *creation*. This is emphasized by Christian eudaimonsits like Augustine and Aquinas: God freely created nature—comprising a manifold variety of particular natures, each with its own specific set of powers and potentialities—and he declared repeatedly in Genesis 1 that the nature he has created is *good*. The things God has created have proper functions corresponding to their natures, they operate properly and well in certain ways, and they flourish under certain conditions. God's command to human beings, about how to live, how to express—and not express—their sexuality, how to treat others etc., presuppose his prior expression of his good will in creating them the way he has. God's commands, and biblical ethical teaching in general, guide his people in realizing his creative purposes for them. God's law is a gift, for their good—so that they may flourish. In this sense the biblical picture, even in the context of law, is often explicitly eudaimonistic. God's commands are part of his blessing of the people, for their good, as expressions of his *shalom* (Ge 12, Nu 6).[14]

In sum, biblical ethics is based on God's character and thus it is a virtue ethic. Biblical laws enable us to become more like God imitating his holy and loving nature. We are also wise to note that God first revealed his will not by his commands but by his creation. The created order has a proper function that corresponds to its individual natures. And when, say, human beings, who are created in the image of God with a spiritual-moral nature, obey God's spiritual-moral commands they flourish. Thus, our natural motive to obey is for our own wellbeing.

Divine Motivation Theory

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[13] *Imago/Imitatio Dei*: Gn 1:26-28; Lv 19:2; Dt 10:12-19; 2 Sm 9:3; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10; *Imago/Imitatio Christi*: Rm 8:28-30; 2 Co 3:17-18; 2 Co 4:16; 1 Pt 2:20-22.

[14] David A. Horner, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Why Christian Ethics Should be Eudaimonistic," *Evangelical Philosophical Society* (November 2003): 22-23 (emphases in the original).

At this point I would like to introduce a defeater to divine command theory (DCT), particularly Adams' modified divine command theory, propositioned by Linda Zagzebski in her book, *Divine Motivation Theory*.[15] Zagzebski offers a general argument against DCT:

> But DC theory *rarely* makes all moral properties relevant to the evaluation of human persons derive from the divine will, so, unlike DM theory [divine motivation theory], it does not offer a global theory of value.[16]

It is important that Zagzebski qualifies her statement by saying "rarely." I believe that the modified DCT that we have been discussing (prescribed by Adams and Horner) is that exception, which takes in to consideration dominant moral properties, such as love, goodness, and happiness. Zagzebski moves to critique Adams' modified DCT.

She argues that his proposal is *ad hoc*, which merely "succeeds at answering the objection it is designed to address…."[17] Agreed. If the term "love" is simply added as an adjective to the noun "God," then it does not seem to answer much. But love is not a vacuous property to be interpreted subjectively. It is an attribute of the revealed will of God—of which he offers countless examples in both testaments. Thus, ultimately, the *ad hoc* argument seems vapid.

Next, she moves to point out that in his modified DCT "[t]here is no intrinsic connection between a command and the property of being loving."[18] I could also concur that explicitly there is no intrinsic connection with *we ought to obey divine commands because a loving God commands them*. However, I do believe it is implied that we are motivated to obey a loving God's commands because it is good for us, especially the modified DCT I have been prescribing. For Zagzebski what grounds morality is divine motivation: "The right thing for humans to do is to act on motives that imitate the divine motives."[19] She then explains in detail the seminal strength of her own theory, which avoids the main weakness of Adams' theory.

I quote her at length:

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[15] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[16] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258 (emphasis added).

[17] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 260.

[18] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 260.

[19] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 260.

The arbit[r]ariness problem may or may not be answerable in a DC theory, but the problem does not even arise in DM theory. That is because a will needs a reason, but a motive *is* a reason. The will according to Aquinas, always chooses 'under the aspect of good', which means that reasons are not inherent in the will itself. By contrast, we have seen that motives provide not only the impetus to action, but also the reason for the action. Motives are both initiating reasons and justifying reasons. If we know that God acts from a motive of love, there is no need to look for a further reason for the act. On the other hand, a divine command requires a reason, and if the reason is or includes fundamental divine motivational states such as love, it follows that even DC theory needs to refer to God's motives in order to avoid the consequence that moral properties are arbitrary and that God Himself is not good. Such a move makes divine motivates more basic than the divine will even in DC theory.[20]

Zagzebski makes some excellent observations concerning both DCT and DMT. It appears plausible that the divine motives justify a loving God to inspire us to action for our own flourishing. I also agree that "divine motives [are] more basic than the divine will even in DC theory."[21] However, I am a bit uncomfortable with Zagzebski's vague description of the relationship between God's nature and his motives. She contends:

There is no need to overcome by argument, much less by an argument appealing to divine simplicity [the Thomistic doctrine used by Stump and Kretzmann (1985)], a prior expectation that God's motives are dissociated from His nature, as in the case of God's commands. That God's motives of love, mercy, and so on are part of His nature is prima facie plausible. That God's commands are part of His nature is not.[22]

True, God's commands are not part of his nature or essence. I would argue that they are indirect effects of his nature. But what about basic motives, such as love and mercy? Are they "part" of his nature? It would have been helpful if Zagzebski had explained what she meant by the terms "part" and "nature." I am assuming by her use of the word "part" that she takes a revisionist position as to the doctrine of

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[20] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261 (emphasis in the original).

[21] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261.

[22] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261.

divine simplicity, which I do not have a problem with.[23] But what exactly does a divine nature entail for Zagzebski?

Merging DCT and DMT

Does God's nature ground his motives or are his motives sufficient to ground themselves? It seems reasonable to me that what makes God loving is that his love stems from a good primal "place"—a good nature. That is, God's nature grounds his motives. True, as Zagzebski puts it, "[m]otives are both initiating reasons and justifying reasons"[24] to act; however, what makes the reasons "good" and not "evil" is his nature, which directly influences or affects his loving motives, which directly affects his loving commands. Here is a thought experiment: how can we be justified in imitating God in the actual world if God could have made it the case that we imitate him by slaughtering innocent children for sport? It seems to me that the only way we can be warranted in imitating God is if his motivation or reason for action stems from a good nature.

Furthermore, does she hold that God's nature is identical to his motives or that his nature is composed of strictly motivational properties or that his nature is tantamount to him possessing motivational properties? And are these properties essential or accidental to his nature? And to which of these properties does the divine motive to love others belong? If divine motivation is an *essential* or *necessary* property (i.e., a divine property exemplified in all possible worlds), and he necessarily possesses that property, then it was necessarily the case (or it could not have been otherwise) that God—the only necessary being that exists in every possible world—was motivated (or had reason) to inspire or motivate his creation. But that implies that God had to (or was obligated to) create the actual world in order to motivate its subjects. But God was under no obligation to create human beings. That is, in some possible worlds, God was not motivated to create us, which seems right if we hold to a traditional view of divine sovereignty. But once he did create us, *infra* ("after") creation (i.e., after he decreed to create the world), it does seem necessary that God should motivate his subjects to flourish, if we appeal to divine love. Because God operated from loving motives *once* he created the world, it appears he is obligated to motivate others to act by his loving acts, especially by the

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[23] I, myself, take a revisionist position up to a certain point. I hold to what Jay Richards calls "Christian essentialism," which has two parts: (1) God's essence possesses divine perfections and properties; and (2) God possesses essential and accidental properties. Jay W. Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 17.

[24] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261

Incarnation and Atonement in the person of Christ Jesus.[25] That is, *supra* ("before") creation (i.e., before he decreed to create the world), a perfectly sovereign deity did not have to create or motivate the world. But *infra* creation, he was obligated by love to motive or inspire us by his loving actions. Thus, *supra* creation, divine motivation is not an essential property (unless we make the giant leap that God was obligated to create the actual world). God is a necessary being who exists in all possible worlds with his essential properties, but his motivation to inspire is not an essential property that he possesses in all possible worlds. I believe this plausible explanation raises some questions as to what Zagzebski means when she argues that God's *motive* of love is part of his nature.[26] So where does that leave us as far as God exemplifying the property of divine motivation, which I think he does possess in the actual world?

I think one answer comes via employing *accidental* or *contingent* properties, which are divine properties that do not exist in all possible worlds. Let us start by assuming the biblical truth that "God is love" (see 1 Jn 4:8), which is to say that God's nature is love, which is to say that love is an essential divine property. But how can God necessarily possess the property of love and yet not be necessarily motivated from love to love others? I explain this below with the help of imaginary concentric circles.

Imagine a diagram of concentric circles like the ones we use for the electron orbital shells of atoms. I assume that God's "core" or nature, represented by the core shell, houses the essential property of, say, love. But I also imagine that next to the core shell is the first orbital shell that represents the accidental property of motivation, or to be more specific the contingent motivational property to love someone other than himself. Between God's necessary and contingent properties there exists a natural flow from love to loving (motives). But he also "stands" in a cause-and-effect relationship with his commands, which he wills from his motive to love others.[27] God is the causal agent of his loving commands, which can be represented by a third orbital shell. On this model, which utilizes a modified DCT, God motivates us to imitate him by his essential property of love (see Jn 3:16; Rm 5:8; Eph 2:4). But our heavenly Father does not merely model goodness by his own actions, he also commands his children, " 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy' " (Lv 19:2, NIV; cf. Lv 11:44-45; 20:7, 26; Mt 5:48; 1 Pt 1:16). Notice that the demand to be like God is his *being* holy.

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[25] For a further discussion about the importance of Christology for ethics vis-à-vis DMT, see Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 262.

I look forward to discussing this further in volume II: New Testament Flourishing.

[26] See Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261.

[27] For a thought provoking discussion about what it means for God to possess properties or stand in relation to properties, read Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991).

What I hope to have accomplished here is to have merged a modified DCT, which discusses God's nature, commands, and will, with DMT, which discusses divine motivations, by taking Zagzebki's critique of Adam's DCT seriously, when she says, "There is no intrinsic connection between a command and the property of being loving."[28] Because a nature is essential to God's existence, and the property of motivation is contingent *before* the creation yet "necessary"[29] *after* creation, I thought it would be important to synthesize the two theories to better explain what God is like, particularly his character and sovereignty, and what his intentions are for us.

In sum, God designed us after his image to live fulfilled lives by living according to our moral and spiritual nature. Moreover, God's nature, motives, commands, and will act as the moral model for humans to imitate and obey. God commands a loving act from his revealed will and models a loving act from his loving nature, in order to motivate us to be loving as he is loving.

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[28] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 260.

[29] At this point I purposefully equivocate on the term "necessary." Before I have used it as a property that exists in all possible worlds, but here I use it as a heuristic device to describe a property in the actual world. Regardless, this should not impede my argument.