

Trinitarian Contractarianism

Theists Need a New Theory of Interpersonal Obligation

Theistic ethics is a centuries-long dance between natural law and divine command theory, which arguably began with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus in the 13th century. Aquinas advanced the paradigmatic theistic natural law theory (NLT), whereas Scotus developed a unique but influential divine command theory (DCT).¹ The two approaches have sophisticated contemporary representatives. Leading natural law theorists include John Finnis and Mark Murphy², and leading divine command theorists include Robert Adams and John Hare.³

These theories share a weakness. They cannot explain the social character of moral obligations between functioning adult humans.⁴ I understand obligations as duties that enable mutual accountability and allow us to sanction and blame one another for violations. This practice of responsibility defines obligation's social character. Promissory obligations illustrate. When John promises Reba to help her, she can insist that he keep it. Promissory duties have social character.

Natural law theorists offer no account of the social character of obligation.⁵ They have often held that obligations come from the commands of a superior, and God in most cases.⁶ In this way, their strategy for explaining social character resembles that of DCT.

Divine command theorists attempt to capture the social character of obligation by explaining obligations in terms of a relationship between one God and human beings.⁷ This is not a bad strategy. However, DCT explains obligation in only one direction—from God to human persons—and so does not explain the social character of our obligations *to one another*. Social character

¹ Scotus 2017, *Ordinatio* III, D. 37. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IaIIae 18, 91, 94.

² Finnis 2011, Murphy 2001.

³ Adams 1999, Hare 2015. Also see Quinn 1978, and Evans 2013.

⁴ My arguments should apply to divine motivation theories, such as Zagzebski 2004. And to divine desire theories, such as Miller 2009, though I cannot show that here.

⁵ When I speak of obligations, I mean obligations between functioning adult humans.

⁶ Aquinas 2002, Suarez [1612] 2015.

⁷ The social character of obligations figures into discussions of divine command theory. See Hare 2015, pp. 109-12 and Murphy 2011, pp. 124-32. But the ur-figure is Adams 1999, pp. 241-8.

implies reciprocity with obligees, but creature and creator lack relations of reciprocity—the obligations are too one-sided.

Contractarianism can explain social character by basing obligations on moral principles that we accept or would accept under the proper circumstances.⁸ Given joint acceptance, we may hold one another responsible for rule violations. For when we insist that others uphold their obligations to follow moral rules, we only hold them to their own standards. Recall John holding Reba to her promise; he holds her to a rule she accepts, given that everyone believes that morality requires promise-keeping.⁹

Few theists adopt contractarianism. They assume that God must explain moral requirements, including obligations, hence their focus on natural law and divine command.¹⁰ For many natural law theorists, God explains ethical requirements by being Goodness.¹¹ God is the measure of all other goodness, the object of practical reasoning, and so the source of natural law. For divine command theorists, moral requirements originate in the divine will.¹² Theistic moral theorists argue that some aspect of God explains ethical requirements, yet so far, no contractarians agree.

We have a puzzle. God must help explain the social character of obligation, but in doing so, God must not make moral obligations *all about God*. Inter-human relations must assist theism in explaining the social character of obligation. We need a dual-source explanation, one partly theistic and partly interpersonal, yet NLT, DCT, and contractarianism cannot do the work. Call this *the social character puzzle*.

I solve the social character puzzle with a contractarian validity test for purported obligations. The test tells us whether our purported moral obligations are bona fide and whether we have previously unknown obligations. It does so by asking which moral rules can be justified from multiple points of view. The contractarian validity test thus *proximately* explains our obligations. I adopt

⁸ Gauthier 1986, Scanlon 1998, Southwood 2010.

⁹ Or rather, the social character of obligation between functioning adult moral reasoners.

¹⁰ In this paper, I will sometimes use the term “moral requirements” to refer to all rules that we must follow. Obligations are a subset of moral requirements.

¹¹ Stump and Kretzmann 1991 explains the sense in which God is Goodness, and yet not the form of the good.

¹² Murphy 2011, pp. 60-1. [you might here mention divine desire and divine exemplar theories]

contractarianism because it explains our obligations through an interpersonal factor: an agreement. Put differently, facts about social relations vindicate our obligations.

I also provide a foundation for the contractarian test, which tells us why we should observe obligations derived from jointly accepted moral rules. This foundation *ultimately* explains our obligations by grounding the validity test. The foundation is theistic in that an aspect of the divine nature underwrites the test. This aspect will theistically explain our obligations. Facts about God will explain our obligations as well as interpersonal facts.

I appeal to an aspect of the divine nature seldom used in moral theory. God helps explain our obligations by *being a Trinity*. The Trinity is a community of three persons so united in love that they share a single will, and they are Love, the measure of all other love. The Trinity explains the social character of obligation, then, by exemplifying proper relations between persons. God-as-Trinity has an intrinsic social nature that humans can imitate.

Theistic moral philosophers argue that we have a powerful reason to resemble the divine, and communities have a decisive reason to maintain relations of unified love. In doing so, we together resemble the Trinity, and our interpersonal relations imitate the relations between divine persons.

My argument relies on Aquinas's account of love that Eleonore Stump has revived and enriched.¹³ *Aquinas-Stump love* consists of a desire for the good of the beloved and a desire to unite with her.¹⁴ As Aquinas says, love consists of two drives "towards the good which a man wishes to someone ... and towards that to which he wishes some good."¹⁵ Love also involves a powerful drive to satisfy these goodness and unity desires.

¹³ Stump 2012, p. 91. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II q.26, a.4.

¹⁴ I will sometimes speak of desiring unity with the beloved or union with the beloved, but I understand this as wanting a unity of will, since that is the essence of union between persons.

¹⁵ Aquinas 2016, 1.2.26.4. For a development and defense of Aquinas's account of love, see Stump 2012, p. 91. I will also take the Aquinas-Stump account of love to be a specification of agape. It specifies Biblical love for other persons. They do not describe romantic love (eros), love of friends (philia), or mere affection (storge). For the famed discussion of these kinds of love, see Lewis 1960.

The Trinity grounds *a norm of mutual love* between persons, since, to imitate God, we must desire the goodness and unity of all and act accordingly. The norm yields a test for our obligations to follow moral rules. This test validates a moral rule when those subject to the rule can accept it. I understand acceptance as a response to reasons, such that John accepts a rule when he has adequate reason from his perspective to accept it. So, the test validates moral rules that we have reason to think advances the goodness and unity of all and so would accept on that basis.

I will specify the test much further below. For now, we can see (very roughly) how the Trinity explains the test of mutual love and (also very roughly) how the test validates obligations. Theism *ultimately* explains our obligations, whereas contractarianism *proximately* explains our obligations. This hybrid approach solves the social character puzzle.

I now sharpen the social character puzzle (II) and outline my strategy for solving it (III). The next section (IV) shows how the Trinity grounds a norm of mutual love, which provides an ultimate explanation of our obligations. I then show that the norm of mutual love yields a contractarian test, and that this test provides the proximate explanation of our obligations (V). The final section (VI) concludes by using these claims to solve the social character puzzle. I call the solution *Trinitarian contractarianism*.

The Social Character Puzzle

Most natural law theories deem an act immoral when it is "a defective response to the good."¹⁶ To characterize moral wrongness, we need only identify fitting responses to goodness. Natural laws also have obligatory force. We are obligated to obey them, we are wrong to defy them, and we incur guilt if an authoritative being (like God) imposes them on us.¹⁷

DCTs have complained that NLT cannot explain the social character of moral obligation. Moral obligation is "irreducibly social." We have obligations only if we are subject to demands "in the

¹⁶ Murphy 2011, p. 161.

¹⁷ Murphy 2011. NLTs have appealed to divine commands for centuries, a strategy I address below.

context of a social relationship."¹⁸ To assess these claims, we first need an account of social character, which I explain in terms of *moral rules*.

Moral Rules and Social Character. To unpack the social character of obligation, I draw on the idea of social morality found in the work of Kurt Baier, P.F. Strawson, Joseph Raz, and Gerald Gaus.¹⁹ Social morality is a set of moral rules that we use to require or prohibit the actions of others.²⁰ These ethical rules have five features. (1) They are imperatival and (2) required for social coordination. They are (3) enforced with social sanctions, (4) reciprocal or universalizable, and (5) our reasons to obey the rules often override other reasons for action.

Allow me to say more. The social character of obligation derives from moral rules. These rules allow us to demand that others perform certain actions by attaching deontic operators (must, must not, must allow) to features of those actions.²¹ In this way, moral rules "structure social interaction." They thus "allow us to live together in cooperative, mutually beneficial, social relations."²²

We enforce moral rules with social sanction. As Baier notes, moral rules need support from "characteristically moral pressure."²³ Strawson defines a socially sanctioned demand as one "made with the permission and approval of a society; and backed ... with its power."²⁴

Moral rules apply to those who demand compliance with them. They are reciprocal. Social morality cannot exist without "reciprocal acknowledgment of rights and duties."²⁵ Moral rules must meet a universalizability condition: if they hold for one, they hold for all.

¹⁸ Ibid. Murphy refers the reader to Adams 1999, pp. 238-41, and for a Kantian account to Darwall 2006.

¹⁹ Baier 1995, pp. 195-224, Strawson 1974, pp. 29-49, Raz 2009, pp. 41-3, Gaus 2011, pp. 2-13. This contrasts with the account of obligation's social character articulated in Darwall 2006. Also see Vallier 2017. For a concise critique of Darwall, see Murphy 2011, pp. 167-172.

²⁰ Gaus 2011, p. 2.

²¹ Gaus 2011, p. 6.

²² Ibid., p. 4.

²³ Baier 1954, p. 108.

²⁴ Strawson 1974, p. 38.

²⁵ Strawson 1974, p. 40.

If a moral rule is valid, it must rest on reasons that generally override or exclude other reasons for action. We may call these moral reasons. Baier thought that "moral reasons are superior to all others" in that morality locates reasons that override self-interest. Moral reasons are those strong enough to condemn harmful pursuits of self-interest, though they may only trump other reasons on balance.²⁶ Alternatively, moral reasons may be exclusionary. They excuse us from acting on the total balance of reasons favoring some action.²⁷ In particular, moral reasons justify setting aside reasons to pursue our good.

Based on our account of moral rules and reasons, we can define the social character of obligation. It consists in this: we may direct one another to follow moral rules and sanction violators.

Theism and Social Character. The social character puzzle arises from the constraints theists typically place on explanations of moral obligation. Two such constraints are *sovereignty* and *loyalty*. First, Murphy argues that theistic moral theorists should expect God to ground ethical requirements²⁸ because theists see God as sovereign over all creation.²⁹ An agent is sovereign over a domain when "things in that domain [depend] on that [agent] for their existence." Facts about that agent determine the character of things in that domain.³⁰ Sovereignty thus gives God "sourcehood" over moral requirements. God is sovereign over the moral universe, much as God is sovereign over the material universe. God emits morality.

Murphy adds that, on orthodox theism, we must be loyal to God. Nothing may tempt us to disobey God, not even other kinds of value. If so, NLT mistakenly allows some things to derive their goodness apart from God.³¹ Our reasons to pursue such goods might compete with our loyalty to

²⁶ Baier 1958, pp. 148-150.

²⁷ Raz 1990 (1975), sec 1.2.

²⁸ Murphy describes moral requirements as "laws," which arguably include moral obligations. I will assume, then, that his critique applies to theories of moral obligation.

²⁹ Murphy 2011., pp. 9-11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³¹ Murphy 2011, p. 96.

God³², but if God directly explains all goodness, no other values test our loyalty. We can reconcile devotion to God with moral commitment only if God defines morality.

Some theists will reject these conceptions of sovereignty and loyalty.³³ God's sovereignty may not encompass necessary truths. Morality might operate similarly. But many theists will find the sovereignty and loyalty constraints attractive. Both NLTs³⁴ and DCTs argue that God helps explain moral requirements. More broadly, theists generally seem to assume that God explains morality. I will thus assume that theists will explain our obligations in theistic terms or attempt to do so.

Interpersonal Social Character. The other piece of the puzzle is interpersonal. We expect relations between persons to explain the social character of obligation. Here, contractarianism provides a model explanation. We have moral obligations to one another if and only if we jointly accept ethical rules that apply to us all. That explains moral obligation interpersonally. Relations between human persons figure into the explanation of moral obligation for a moral theory to explain social character. Obligations ground interpersonal accountability relations, and so interpersonal relations must prove explanatory.

Now the social character puzzle: The proper explanation of obligation is theistic *and* interpersonal, but NLT, DCT, and contractarianism cannot play both roles.

Contractarianism fails because God plays no role in moral explanation. This was by design. Contractarians designed contractarianism as an alternative to theistic moral theories. The atheistic character of contractarianism is manifest.

³² This is one way to understand the Abraham and Isaac narrative in the Hebrew Bible. Abraham must decide whether to obey God or do the (independently) right thing. If morality never tempts us to disloyalty, we read the story differently. Abraham must choose between two ways of obeying or drawing near to God.

³³ They may allow universals outside the divine. For a recent discussion of the literature on this centuries-long debate, see Ward 2020.

³⁴ Many draw the line between classical and modern natural law theory with Hugo Grotius. Grotius argued that if "there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to him." Grotius 1950, introduction.

We also know why natural law theory fails—NLTs have no account of the social character of obligation. Sensing this, they often explain our obligations through divine command or the divine will, while rejecting DCT as an explanation of moral requirements generally.

But whether one adopts NLT or DCT, divine commands do not assign interpersonal relations any role in grounding our obligations. God's commands have a kind of social character: they connect the obligee with another agent—God. But creature and creator do not stand in reciprocal relations. And creatures may never sanction their creator.³⁵ The creature-creator relationship lacks fundamental properties of inter-human moral relationships.

Consider a defense of divine commands. Divine commands can take many forms aside from strict directives. God can make a range of moral laws, as humans make positive laws.³⁶ So, imagine that God commands John to keep his promise to Reba and authorizes them both to hold John responsible for violations. Promissory obligations now travel together with accountability relations. But they are the wrong kind of accountability relations because John and Reba's accountability relationship is with God, not with one another. Even if God tells John to keep his promise *for Reba's sake*, nothing changes. John only owes his promise to God. Divine commands can only create obligations to God, not to others.

Hence the social character puzzle. Contractarian moral theory ignores God, whereas NLT and DCT ignore interpersonal accountability relations.

A Two-Step Solution

We recognize a panoply of moral obligations. These obligations have a social character in virtue of their associated accountability relations—we may direct one another to fulfill them. Yet some recognized obligations are not bona fide. A society might recognize an obligation to remain an enslaved person, but that purported obligation is fake. People lack a moral reason to fulfill and enforce the duty and may have a moral reason not to enforce it. They should not blame or ostracize

³⁵ Unless the creator allows for it, such as by making a promise to the creature. Also, see ft. 11.

³⁶ See Murphy 2023.

enslaved people who leave the service of their masters. They should blame masters who reclaim their "property."

To solve the social character puzzle, we must answer two questions. First, do we have the obligations we affirm? If not, we can alter or abolish the social rule that generates those obligations. Second, do we have unrecognized obligations? If so, we must establish social rules that identify those obligations. A proper test for bona fide obligations will test our actual moral practice and require changes when a moral rule, or the absence of one, fails the test.

To solve the social character puzzle, we also need a dual-source approach. The first and ultimate source of obligation rests on the divine nature, so our obligations have a theistic foundation. The second and proximate source of our obligations rests on interpersonal relations. Our obligations also have an interpersonal foundation. Since the interpersonal foundation is proximate, and the theistic foundation is ultimate, we can rephrase the conditions of any solution to the puzzle. In short: any solution must provide a theistic foundation for an interpersonal validity test of our system of moral rules.

We can now proceed in two steps. First, provide a moral metaphysical foundation for an interpersonal validity test. Second, specify the test. I take these steps in sections IV and V.

The Trinity as Ultimate Explanation

My solution to the social character puzzle appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity. God is three persons, but one substance. God is a community of persons in eternal, unchanging, loving relations. I claim that the relations between Trinitarian persons set a moral standard, which determines how human persons ought to relate to one another. Trinitarian relations thus ground a master norm for human relationships. Call it the *norm of mutual love*.

This norm, I will argue, explains the social character of obligation, but not as a function of divine goodness.³⁷ The norm is an aspect of divine goodness (though not a part of divine goodness). The norm helps *describe* God's goodness.

Mutual love conjoins four norms that flow from (Aquinas-Stump) loving others, forming a compound norm.

The norm of mutual love: Desire the good and unity of all, and act on each desire in the appropriate context.

Let's explore the norm's foundation. I begin by reflecting on some propositions that Christian theists accept:

1. God is the good.³⁸
2. God is to be imitated.
3. God is a Trinity.

According to premise 1, God is not merely good or perfectly good. Instead, God is goodness.³⁹ God is the standard of goodness in which all good things participate. As Augustine claims, "The highest good, than which there is no higher, is God, and consequently He is unchangeable good."⁴⁰ Aquinas concurs: "God is the supreme good simply, and not only as existing in any genus or order of things."⁴¹

³⁷ In future work, I argue that the norm of mutual love also characterizes the divine will. If so, the norm describes God's will – because God's will is loving. The norm of mutual love should specify some of what God has or could have willed. If so, our obligations to God and one another should not conflict.

³⁸ Augustine, *On the Nature of Good*, Ch. 1. Aquinas 2016, 1.6.3.

³⁹ For an account of how God is goodness, see Stump 2016. For several articles exploring the identification, see MacDonald 1991.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *On the Nature of Good*, Ch. 1.

⁴¹ Aquinas 2016, 1.6.3.

Premise 2 claims that to be good, each person must imitate God insofar as she can, given her limited nature. Augustine: "All other good things are only from Him."⁴² Boethius: "While only God is (good) by nature, as many as you like may become so by participation."⁴³

Aquinas: "Everything is therefore called good from the divine goodness."⁴⁴ We should imitate God because, in doing so, we participate in goodness itself. We become good. Christians often claim that our ultimate end is the imitation of God. We find this insight in the doctrine of theosis, the Eastern patristic doctrine that humans can become divine. Our ultimate end is to become good by becoming like Goodness itself.

Yet we speak of goodness in many ways. Some goodness is objective. Its status as goodness does not depend on anyone's desires, beliefs, or sentiments. Other goodness is subjective or attitude-dependent.⁴⁵ Some goodness is agent-neutral, good simpliciter, and not necessarily good *for* anyone, or goodness can be agent-relative—only good for some agents.⁴⁶ Some goodness is extrinsic—good for the sake of some other good. Other goodness is intrinsic—good in itself. Some goodness is instrumental—chosen for the sake of something further—but other goodness is final—chosen for its own sake.⁴⁷

Goodness applies to individuals and groups, yielding personal goodness and aggregate goodness (the sum of personal goodness). But goodness can apply to the community as such. That is a common good (a good that goes beyond an aggregate in some sense).⁴⁸

What goodness am I after? Participation in the divine nature confers true goodness. Following many Aristotelians, I presume that our good consists in flourishing according to our nature. God thus makes us good by helping us realize our nature, which involves participation in God's nature.⁴⁹

⁴² Augustine 1991.

⁴³ Boethius 1999, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Aquinas 2016.

⁴⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-realism/>

⁴⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasons-agent/>

⁴⁷ Korsgaard 1983.

⁴⁸ Murphy 2005.

⁴⁹ Aristotle 2000, Annas 1993, Aquinas 2016, Stump 2005.

God's goodness is also good simpliciter. When we imitate God, we realize true goodness. However, God's goodness is also good *for us* because God helps realize our nature. Socially, a community can share personal goodness, creating aggregate goodness. But since we take part in goodness as a community, we also enjoy a common good.

The goodness we receive by participation is both intrinsic and final: good in itself and worth choosing for its own sake.⁵⁰ A human participates in goodness to the extent that she flourishes according to her kind. Flourishing includes acquiring and exercising the virtues: eudaimonia consists in these activities. Eudaimonia is both our intrinsic and final good. It is good in itself, and so should govern our choices. For this reason, I will sometimes speak of willing the good of all as willing their flourishing, well-being, or interests.

Now let's turn to premise 3. According to orthodox Trinitarianism, God is one substance, but three persons. God is tri-personal: three persons unified as one being. Christian theologians have characterized tri-personality with two models: classical and social. Classical Trinitarianism understands the divine persons as mere relations: persons exist if fatherhood and sonship are instantiated. In contrast, social Trinitarianism can assign consciousness or will to each divine person.⁵¹ I presuppose neither model, so I set the debate aside.⁵² I will only assume that divine persons are substantive enough to love each other.

Premises 1 and 3 imply a fourth:

4. The Trinity is the good.

Trinitarian metaphysics is complex, but the inference is innocent. The triune God is the good. So, the good is not one person, but three persons. The good is a *community*.⁵³ God the Father is not goodness, God the Son is not goodness, God the Holy Spirit is not goodness. Instead, God is

⁵⁰ I take no stand on the objective good for humans. I adopt a toy Aristotelian model for purposes of illustration.

⁵¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>. Thom 2012 reviews the historical discussion about Trinitarian personhood.

⁵² Divine and human personhood could be too distinct for one to partake in the other. I address this criticism elsewhere.

⁵³ The claim that God is a community is analogical. It should not imply that, say, God has parts or is in some way not of one substance. I understand a community as several persons who bear relationships with one another. The Trinity has this feature, even on Latin views.

goodness. Augustine agrees. The Trinity is "the one supreme and supremely good God." More directly: "the Father is good, the Son is good, the Holy Spirit too is good; yet there are not three good ones but one good one, of whom it is said No one is good but the one God (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19)."⁵⁴

Some contemporary Christian philosophers agree. Adams equates God with goodness and argues that "the Good itself is also importantly like a society of persons, as claimed by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity."⁵⁵ J. R. Illingworth calls God a "Trinity in Unity; a social God, with all the conditions of personal existence internal to himself."⁵⁶

Premises 2 and 3 yield:

5. The Trinity is to be imitated.⁵⁷

Who should imitate God?⁵⁸ Christians say that we should imitate Jesus Christ by acquiring Christ's virtues, such as faith, hope, and love. But imitating Christ means imitating one divine person, not three.

Some Western theologians teach that a single person can acquire the "image" of the Trinity (*imago Trinitatis*).⁵⁹ The image follows three powers of the soul: memory, understanding, and will. If a rational soul integrates these powers, it imitates the Trinity since the Trinity has these powers as a unity. The soul then bears the *imago Trinitatis*.

⁵⁴ Emphasis in original. Augustine 1991, pp. 127, 196.

⁵⁵ Adams 1999, p. 42.

⁵⁶ Illingworth 1903, p. 42.

⁵⁷ If the claim that the good itself is to be imitated is a logical truth, then 5 follows from 4.

⁵⁸ In this paper, I shall use the terms "imitate" and "resemble" interchangeably.

⁵⁹ In *De Trinitate*, Augustine claims that a single person can imitate the Trinity. Her mental attributes must only arrange themselves in the right way. But even if Augustine is correct, that should not prevent my line of argument. For discussion, see Emery and Levering 2011, p. 415. For a review of the Latin doctrine of the *imago Trinitate*, see Slotemaker forthcoming. The individual *imago Trinitatis* comes up in Eastern patristics, like Gregory Palamas. See Felmy 2011, pp. 220-1.

The psychic resemblance approach has a grave limitation, however. No human is three persons, not even if we define personhood relationally⁶⁰, so only a group can imitate the Trinity. I cannot imitate the Trinity, but *we* can.⁶¹ Stanley Grenz puts it this way: "Participation in the dynamic of Trinitarian love... is not ours as isolated individuals. It is a privilege we share with all other believers."⁶² Imitating God is inherently interpersonal.⁶³ Participation is a privilege we can share with everyone.

Premises 4 and 5 imply that we participate in Goodness by resembling the Trinity together. Each of us becomes good by realizing ideal relations with others, and we also achieve a common good, no mere sum of each person's good.

Humans can imitate few Trinitarian attributes⁶⁴, but we can emulate the attribute of loving others.⁶⁵ Suppose that God is love, as the Christian Scriptures teach (1 John 4:16), and God is a Trinity. God is love by being the simultaneous object and subject of love, and both loves and is loved in virtue of being a Trinity. "God exists as a Triad of Persons, a community of personal freedom and love. God does not have love as an attribute; He is love, because his life is actualized as communion."⁶⁶

To participate in goodness, we should love each other for each other's sake, and we should love as best we can. Our chief motive for love is not to be good. But becoming good justifies loving others. In loving others, we become good because we are like the Good, and we befriend God by befriending the Good.

⁶⁰ On relational accounts of personhood, persons only by relating to others.

⁶¹ The Trinity indwells within the believer's soul, but that is not a relationship of imitation.

⁶² Grenz 1997, p. 295.

⁶³ See Stump's account of the intrinsic second-personality of the virtues. Stump's view supports the claim that theosis requires a relationship with God. Stump 2018, pp. 217-221.

⁶⁴ A partial exception is a unity since unity involves an agreement of will in love. Sovereignty may play a role for classical DCT if DCT captures the right kind of relationship. In an ethical theory, God's righteousness and impeccability play the same role as God's goodness.

⁶⁵ I do not mean to reject divine simplicity in distinguishing between mutual love and goodness.

⁶⁶ Russell 2004, p. 318.

My view implies that loving others helps characterize goodness. Goodness includes the proliferation of loving relations as a proper part, a necessary component. I also employ the idea of Aquinas-Stump love, where lovers necessarily desire each other's good and act accordingly.⁶⁷

One might sniff a vicious circularity: I have said that mutual love is part of the good and that love involves willing the good of others. But these claims are not inconsistent. To be objectively good, humans must love one another, so they must desire the best for each other. But part of what is best for others is to enter relations of mutual love. So, to love others requires willing that they love and receive love. There is no vicious circularity here. I only claim that participation in the good requires wanting to share the good with others.

One might object that humans cannot partake in inter-divine love because our capacity to love pales compared to God. We can only love those we know, and few of them at that. But Aquinas-Stump love can extend to everyone. We can wish people well without knowing them and we can promote others' good by obeying rules that indirectly promote their good. We can unite with others by constructing and abiding by shared regulations. Then, we love strangers when we desire and abide by accepted rules, provided we believe these rules advance the common good. We thereby imitate the Trinity.

A loving person must desire the universal good, the good of the entire world. But must a loving person will union with all? That appears infeasible. I nonetheless contend we can love those with whom we cannot unite. We can do so under two conditions: we hope for a future union and prepare ourselves to connect when we can. If someone refuses to unite with those whom she should love, she wills a morality-free zone. Her will opposes moral rules that enable relations of accountability, and so we lack shared rules to hold one another accountable for ethical violations. We then enter a social world of endless moral conflict without rules to resolve our inevitable disputes. No lover can want this on reflection, and so she must will shared rules.

Sometimes uniting with others is dangerous. Vice so suffuses them that joining with them harms us. But these “toxic” personalities only frustrate our desire for union, not destroy it. The lover

⁶⁷ Here I allow that personal good could be response-dependent or response-independent.

hopes vicious persons reform. Meanwhile, we can support rules to govern our more impersonal interactions. A thinner yet still substantive unity remains.

The imperative to imitate the Trinity grounds the norm of mutual love, and I will now show that the norm grounds moral obligation and explains its social character.

The Norm of Mutual Love as Proximate Explanation

The norm of mutual love is this. We should desire the good and unity of all and act on each desire in the appropriate context. The norm holds because we become like God when we abide by it. The imperative to resemble God is the ultimate practical imperative.⁶⁸ So, we have decisive reason to comply with the norm, one that trumps others.

I now develop the norm of mutual love into a test that can validate each society's moral rules. If a moral rule passes the test, then the obligations it specifies have moral validity. The obligations are bona fide, and we should follow them. If we violate our obligations, others may hold us accountable for our failures.

The norm of mutual love has action and attitudinal halves—half of the standard concerns our attitudes. So, we have a validity test for them. Our attitudes lose moral worth as they conflict with our willing the good and union of all. Our motives should not conflict with those two general attitudes. I am concerned with actions more than attitudes in this essay, so I set this half of the norm aside.

The second half of the norm concerns action: we should act to advance goodness and unity. Here is the validity test for moral rules. Here's how it works. If a moral rule promotes the union and flourishing of all, then, by observing the rule, we follow the norm of mutual love. A moral rule specifies obligations if it advances well-being and unity, as moral agents see it.

⁶⁸ Or rather, it is one ultimate imperative with two sides. We should imitate God in God's unity by unifying our character in virtuous living. And we should imitate God in God's sociality by following the norm of mutual love. In another paper, I address the tie between these sides of our ultimate imperative.

The test is thus far ambiguous. Must the moral rule advance our well-being or need we rationally believe the moral rule increases our good? And what sort of good—common or aggregate? When we desire unity, do we mean that the only valid ethical rules are those we can all accept? Or is it to go further and claim one basis for endorsing a rule is to facilitate the union of human beings?

My unargued answers are as follows. First, a genuine moral rule must advance our good in ways we can detect since our obligations ground accountability relations. To hold others accountable, we assume they are culpable for violating a rule, such that agents can rationally determine that the rule advances the well-being of each. The validity test rests on reasonable beliefs about goodness, not goodness per se. That is because accountability relations rest on beliefs. Accountability relationships hold by virtue of what one knows or should have known. Rule violators are otherwise not accountable. True goodness thus enters into accountability relations only through points of view.

Second, the good at stake can be understood in a Paretian fashion. A valid moral rule is one that we have reason to believe advances our joint interests. The rule should not permit sacrificing the few for the many. Few rules fully satisfy this Paretian condition, but it is still an ideal that moral rules should approximate.

Third, the test validates a purported obligation if compliance enables further union. On the Trinitarian picture, the goal of the moral life is to draw nearer to one another forever. Moral life centers on drawing near to everyone. Our moral obligations must partly advance the free, uncoerced unity of all. The theory might, in this way, ground obligations to forgive and reconcile with others, acts that Christians regard as their solemn obligations.

The general good and the union of all often sync. Close union with others is the most significant human good, so moral rules that support friendship advance our good. Yet we must address potential conflicts. Suppose that complying with rule-1 makes us wealthier and helps us sustain friendships. Suppose that rule-2 offers the same two goods in different proportions: it makes us somewhat less affluent but better supports friendships than rule-1. Which moral rule is valid?

The validity test could ratify either rule were they in effect, but we can still rank the rules because relationships lie at the heart of the human good. Most people will prefer societies that emphasize personal relationships. Social unity, then, might play a somewhat larger role in ranking moral rules than other goods.

We can now state the test of mutual love:

The Test of Mutual Love: a moral rule specifies bona fide obligations if and only if those subject to the rule: (i) rationally believe it advances the (Pareto) good of all, (ii) rationally believe it advances the unity of all, and (iii) generally rank social unity over other aspects of the human good.

The Trinitarian Solution

NLT and DCT cannot solve the social character puzzle. A Trinitarian approach can. It explains obligations both theistically and interpersonally by grounding the norm of mutual love. It thereby explains our obligations ultimately and theistically. The standard of mutual love yields the test of mutual love, furnishing a proximate, interpersonal explanation of our obligations. We have our dual-source explanation.

I now provide a more detailed account of what it means to ground inter-human obligations, drawing on the work of Nicholas Southwood.⁶⁹ For Southwood, any foundation for a moral obligation must:

- (i) provide an ultimate explanation of moral obligation (ultimacy).
- (ii) explain why agents necessarily have reasons to act according to it (normativity).
 - a. explains why those reasons are authoritative because they are categorical and binding (authority).
 - b. explains why those reasons are other-regarding (interpersonal).
- (iii) be objective (objectivity), in that it is:

⁶⁹ Here I change the characterizations in Southwood 2010, pp. 7-21. Southwood applies related conditions to all moral requirements. I will only apply them to inter-human moral obligations.

- a. non-subjective (we can get morality right or wrong).
- b. and applies to everyone (universality).

Ultimate Explanation. A moral norm is an ultimate explanation if no further moral fact explains it. For theists, God's nature ultimately explains everything. In my view, the Trinity ultimately explains obligation through the norm of mutual love. My solution can meet the ultimacy condition.

Normativity. Southwood argues moral requirements must have minimal normativity, such that agents "necessarily have reasons to act in accordance with them."⁷⁰ Morality only requires that we act if we have a reason to do so.⁷¹ The "Why be moral?" question lies at the heart of morality. Put differently, "what reason have we to be moral?" is a question of fundamental importance. Along related lines, the "Why uphold our obligations?" question also needs an answer.⁷²

Southwood claims normative reasons must do more than justify action. They are "categorical."⁷³ Categorical moral requirements entail reasons to observe them. These reasons do not depend "on agents' particular interests or desires" to bind us. We cannot sidestep them if we wish.⁷⁴

Our reasons for upholding our obligations must also make an "essential reference to others" in that they refer to the promisee. Our reasons to observe our obligations reference others in another sense, too. When we fail to uphold our obligations, we have normative reason to feel guilty, ashamed, and atone.

The Trinitarian solution to the social character puzzle meets these conditions. All created agents, by necessity, have reasons to abide by the norm of mutual love.⁷⁵ When persons love one another, they resemble the divine together, becoming good. And so, they always have some objective

⁷⁰ Southwood 2010, p. 14. Southwood understands moral requirements much as I have.

⁷¹ As Southwood notes, this is to adopt a kind of internalism about reasons. Externalist readers will reject this condition. But Trinitarian accounts of obligation need not assume internalism.

⁷² I take no stand on whether action-justifying reasons motivate those actions. But, the reasons that justify moral obligations must prove motivating, for they are reasons to become and relate to the divine.

⁷³ Southwood 2010, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Insofar as they have the natural capacity to love others, an idea I explain in another essay. Here I assume everyone has the ability.

reason to become good, and have reason to follow norms of mutual love. This provides a powerful motivation to abide by validated moral rules. By following them, we observe the norm of mutual love and resemble the Trinity.

Our reasons of obligation have authority. Christian life requires becoming as much like God as possible and growing as close to God as we can. Since the norm of mutual love helps us resemble and relate to God, we have strong reasons to follow it, and so should obey moral rules that pass the contractarian validity test.

Validated moral rules also have categorical, binding power. Following the norm of mutual love makes us good, regardless of our attitudes about it. We cannot escape these reasons by changing attitudes or responses.⁷⁶ We should observe the norm. And so, by extension, we follow validated moral rules. In obeying proper moral rules, we become good, apart from our attitudes about it.

Objectivity. Moral obligations have objectivity. We can get them “right and wrong,” as opposed to, say, judgments of taste.⁷⁷ Since our norm partly characterizes the divine nature, it possesses objectivity. And in most any respect. We can use the standard to test any action, we can rationally disagree about its proper application, and the standard applies to every free, created agent. By following the norm⁷⁸, we participate in objective goodness. Being like God is good for every agent that has a good because God is goodness. Since God is a loving community, we participate in goodness as we form a loving community, obeying genuine moral obligations. These obligations apply to everyone, and we can disagree about their proper application.⁷⁹

Our validated obligations have normativity and objectivity, and they also have an ultimate, theistic foundation and a proximate, interpersonal foundation.

⁷⁶ This explanation implies that some moral reasons are external.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ *De re*, at least, if not *de dicto*.

⁷⁹ There is a slight tangle here. Many moral obligations are bound to particular relationships and communities. Not all moral obligations are universal. But this does not count against their objectivity. We objectively ought to obey the moral obligations that apply to us.

The Trinitarian solution to the social character puzzle appears viable. Further, it provides a new theistic metaethics that contrasts with natural law and divine command accounts of moral obligation. I leave many details open as avenues for further development. But we are left with a new moral theory: Trinitarian contractarianism.

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