Worship and Moral Autonomy

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Citation
A number of years ago, James Rachels presented an argument for the necessary non-existence of God.¹ It was based upon a supposed inconsistency between worship and what might be called ‘autonomous moral agency’. In Rachels’ view, one person’s being the worshipper of another is partially determined by the way in which it is appropriate for the first to respond to the commands of the second. In brief, a worshipper’s obedience to commands should be ‘unqualified’.² Rachels thought that there was some kind of incoherence in the requirement that an autonomous moral agent respond to commands in this way. He concluded that there could be no being who, like God, was alleged necessarily to be a fitting object of worship.

Among the critics of Rachels’ argument were Philip L. Quinn and Robert A. Oakes.³ Quinn presented a detailed reconstruction of Rachels’ argument, explicating the modal operators and supplying unexpressed premisses. He then gave reasons for thinking the reconstructed argument valid but unsound. Both Quinn and Oakes also presented arguments against the possibility that an agent’s obedience to divine commands might ever compromise moral autonomy.

What follows is another attempt at restating Rachels’ argument. Reasons are suggested for thinking that Quinn’s reconstruction may have misrepresented Rachels’ views. It is also argued that the attempts of both Oakes and Quinn to exclude possible incompatibility between obedience to divine commands and moral autonomy might not be altogether persuasive. Finally, a different reason is given for thinking that Rachels’ argument is unsound. A brief postscript discusses the possibility that the obligation associated with worship is not a moral obligation but a ‘religious’ obligation, distinct from and possibly inconsistent with moral obligation. The implications of this claim for Rachels’ argument are briefly discussed. A reason is then given for

² Rachels, p. 117.
thinking that God could never issue commands that are inconsistent with morality.

Rachels’ claim that there is some kind of incompatibility between being a worshipper and being an autonomous moral agent cannot be evaluated without some understanding of what he thinks each of these involves.

Rachels gives what appears to be a definition of moral agency, associating it with views of Plato and Kant. ‘To be a moral agent is to be an autonomous or self-directed agent; unlike the precepts of law or social custom, moral precepts are imposed by the agent on himself.’ In the very same paragraph, he discusses briefly what moral virtue would involve, given this Kantian understanding of moral agency. ‘The virtuous man is therefore...identified with the man of integrity, i.e. the man who acts according to precepts which he can, on reflection, conscientiously approve in his own heart.’

This definition of virtue seems to allow that a person could be virtuous even if he did something that was objectively wrong. He might with good reason believe that it was right. But it also suggests that he could act contrary to virtue in doing something right. He might with good reason believe that it was wrong. In other words, on this reading, doing what is objectively right is not a necessary condition for acting as an autonomous moral agent should. Nor is it a sufficient one.

Rachels admits that ‘the concept of moral agency...is complex and controversial’ and that it has not been given the ‘detailed treatment...it requires’. But his brief definition of moral autonomy is so impressionistic and is so quickly followed by his remarks about virtue, that he leaves himself open to misinterpretation. He might appear to be identifying two notions which, though related, are distinct, viz. moral autonomy and virtue. There is some indication that Rachels does intend to distinguish them. The word ‘therefore’ following Rachels’ reference to the virtuous man suggests that what follows it is an explanation of virtue in terms of the previous definition of moral autonomy and not a synonym for the latter.

The distinction between being an autonomous moral agent and acting as an autonomous moral agent should (i.e. being virtuous) must be kept in mind in interpreting Rachels’ incompatibility claim. Morally autonomous agents do not always act as they should. Rachels treats autonomous moral agency as a ‘role’ and a corresponding distinction surely holds in the case of other paradigmatic roles. For example, one can be a parent without acting as a parent should. In the reconstruction of Rachels’ argument presented here, the crucial issue will be the possible inconsistency between acting as a worshipper should and acting as an autonomous moral agent should.

What Rachels takes to be involved in worship has to be gleaned from

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1 Rachels, p. 177.  
2 Rachels, p. 177.  
3 Rachels, p. 178.  
4 As will be explained below, there is reason to think that Quinn fails to distinguish these two notions. The expression ‘moral agent’ is misleading. In some contexts, it can refer to someone who is capable of acting in accordance with morality. In others, it can mean someone who actually acts that way.
various sections of the article. As was noted earlier, the precise issue has to 
do with how an agent should respond to the commands of someone he 
worships. Abraham, the ideal worshipper ‘obeyed without hesitation’ when 
commanded to sacrifice his son. He ‘subordinated ... his own ... judgements 
to God's command'. This, even though ‘God had ordered him to do some-
thing contrary to ... his sense of what would otherwise be right and wrong'.
Elsewhere Rachels indicates that ‘questioning God’ is incompatible with 
worship. ‘God is not to be judged, challenged, defied, or disobeyed ... ;
to do any of these things is incompatible with taking him as One to be 
worshipped'.

Even this incomplete selection of remarks about worship indicates that 
Rachels has a very demanding sense of what it requires, viz., unhesitat-
ing and unquestioning compliance, even when what is commanded is contrary 
to the worshipper’s sense of what is morally permitted. These are some of the 
things included in the claim that the obedience called for is unconditional. 
Not all theists might agree with it.

In the case of worship, as in the case of autonomous moral agency, it is 
important to distinguish between having a role and conforming to it. Rachels 
maintains that a believer in God is logically required to hold that there is 
someone who is worthy of his worship. This suffices to make any theist a 
worshipper, i.e., someone who casts himself in the role of worshipper. But it 
is one thing to cast oneself in the role of worshipper and another thing to be-
have in accordance with the role. As Rachels notes, ‘roles can be violated'. 
Someone can acknowledge having a certain role but sometimes act inap-
propriately. Rachels points to the incident in which Abraham has the 
temerity to bargain with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. This 
shows that ‘Abraham’s record ... was not perfect'. In short, to say that a 
worshipper exists does not entail that there exists someone who always acts 
as a worshipper should.

Given these sketches of what the roles of worshipper and of autonomous 
moral agent involve, how can the alleged conflict between the two support 
an argument for God’s non-existence?

Quinn observes that ‘role-conflict is not logical contradiction'. Perhaps 
this means that there is no logical contradiction in the notion that an agent 
be cast in conflicting roles. It might also mean that there is no logical 
contradiction in the idea that a person might do something which is for-
bidden to him in one role while being required of him in another.

What does seem logically contradictory is that someone be required to do 
something in one capacity which he is prohibited to do in another, assum-
ing that the obligations in question are both of the same kind. Quinn him-
self accepts the assumption that ‘ought statements can be incompatible'.

1 Rachels, p. 175.  2 Rachels, p. 176.  3 Rachels, p. 174.  
4 Rachels, p. 175.  5 Quinn, p. 4.  6 The assumption is that the two conflicting obligations are not merely prima facie but ‘actual’ 
obligations.  
7 Quinn, p. 6.
Given this interpretation of role conflict, it is not too difficult to reconstruct Rachels’ disproof. The key to the reconstruction is the brief formulation of it given by Rachels.¹

(a) If any being is God, he must be a fitting object of worship.

(b) No being could possibly be a fitting object of worship, since worship requires the abandonment of one’s role as an autonomous moral agent.

(c) Therefore, there cannot be any being who is God.

The argument is sketchy. Its second premiss is presumably the conclusion of a subordinate argument whose premisses are suggested in the dependent clause of (b). Reconstruction of the complete argument might proceed in the following way.

(1) Necessarily, if some being is God, then there is an autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is a fitting object of worship.

Premiss (1) interprets the ‘must’ in (a) as a case of necessitas consequentiae. It also assumes that if God is to be a fitting object of worship, he must be such for someone else. Rachels treats worship as a dyadic relation.² Furthermore, since it is irreflexive, the divine being cannot be a fitting object of worship for himself. Furthermore, the worshippers of God who are of concern here are those who are cast in the role of autonomous moral agent.

(2) It is impossible that there is an autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is a fitting object of worship.

(3) It is impossible that some being is God.

The argument is obviously valid. A proof of it can be given in modal system S₅ and in system T as well.³

Premiss (2), of course, needs further support. It can be derived from a subordinate argument with the following premisses:

(1a) Necessarily, if there is an autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is a fitting object of worship, then there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to give ‘unqualified’ obedience to the commands of someone else.

(1b) Necessarily, if there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to give ‘unqualified’ obedience to the commands of someone else, then there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to abandon his role as an autonomous moral agent.

From (1a) and (1b) it follows, in Rachels’ words, that ‘worship requires the abandonment of one’s role as an autonomous moral agent’ (cf. premiss (b), above). But this, in turn, is a necessary conditional whose consequent Rachels presumably thinks impossible. Therefore, the additional subordinate premiss:

(1c) It is impossible that there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to abandon his role as an autonomous moral agent.

¹ Rachels, p. 173.
² Rachels, p. 173.
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Premiss (2) follows from the above three premisses. Again, this can be proved both in modal systems T and S-5.

Premiss (1a) is one that Rachels surely accepts. It (partially) articulates what it means to be a (fitting) object of worship. Furthermore, given Rachels’ understanding of moral autonomy, ‘unqualified’ obedience is necessarily inconsistent with it. Thus, (1b) is also plausibly attributed to him.

Premiss (1c) also needs explanation. It appears to be true, on the assumption that the ‘ought’ it contains is a moral one. Saying that someone had a moral obligation to abandon his role as a moral agent would be similar to saying that someone had a moral obligation to act immorally. If the latter is necessarily false, then so is the former.

Whether or not the above argument is sound is another question. Problems begin with the first premiss. It seems possible that there be a God but either that no other beings exist or that such as do exist not be autonomous moral agents. In which case, there would be no morally autonomous beings for whom God was a fitting object of worship. This difficulty with (1) can be remedied by altering its consequent to speak only of the possibility of there being autonomous agents. Rachels would surely not object if his first premiss were restated as follows:

(1-1) Necessarily, if some being is God, then it is possible that there is an autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is a fitting object of worship.

There is also some question about the truth of (1b). Why does it follow from the fact that someone is obliged to give unqualified obedience to another that the former is obliged to abandon his role as moral agent? Rachels may have confused the (alleged) obligation to abandon the role of moral agent with the (alleged) obligation to violate it. Were this a problem, it could be remedied by substituting for (1b) the following:

(1b-1) Necessarily, if there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to give unqualified obedience to the commands of someone else, then there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to abandon or violate his role as autonomous moral agent.

With this alteration and the corresponding one in (1c), namely

(1c-1) It is impossible that there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to abandon or violate his role as an autonomous moral agent,

a valid argument yielding the same conclusion results.

Unfortunately, it may be necessary to introduce a further complication here. Rachels admits that the being who is a fitting object of worship might not issue any commands. In which case, there would be no actual commands for the worshipper to obey. But, as Rachels notes, this still leaves the possibility of commands to be obeyed without qualification. And even that, he thinks,
suffices to make his point.\textsuperscript{1} To accommodate this consideration, \((1\ b-1)\) would have to be altered to read:

\((1\ b-2)\) Necessarily, if there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to give unqualified obedience to the commands of someone else, then it is possible that there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to abandon or violate his role as an autonomous moral agent.

Again, a valid argument for \((3)\) results. The last two arguments can both be proved in modal system S-5, though not in system T.

One assumption central to the claim of validity for both the original and the revised arguments is that the obligations spoken of in the various premisses are understood univocally. Presumably, the obligation not to abandon or to violate one’s role as moral agent is a moral obligation. To be consistent, all the other obligations spoken of would also have to be moral obligations as well. Interestingly enough, Rachels never explicitly labels the obligation associated with worship a moral one.\textsuperscript{2}

The argument for \((3)\) with the premisses \((1\ 1), (1\ a), (1\ b-2), \) and \((1\ c-1)\) is valid. Someone who disagrees with Rachels’ conclusion will have to claim that one of his premisses is false. But which one? In the final reconstruction presented here, all of the premisses seem quite plausible. They are mostly matters of definition, the argument being totally a priori and in no way infected by contingencies. Central to the argument are Rachels’ conceptions of worship and moral agency. Someone who disagrees with Rachels will, presumably, have fault to find with either or both of these conceptions. They function importantly in the formulation of premisses \((1\ a)\) and \((1\ b-2)\).

Perhaps the most careful and detailed attempt to recast and criticize Rachels’ argument is the one made by Philip L. Quinn. He thinks that the argument is unsound. But, interestingly enough, he denies that the difficulty it poses for the ‘Kantian theist’ is a ‘matter of the logic of the concepts of moral agency or of worthiness of worship’.\textsuperscript{3} Since the above reconstruction seems to involve little else, Quinn’s version of Rachels’ argument and his reasons for thinking it fallacious are worth examination. He first formalizes Rachels’ brief argument and then constructs what he takes to be the subordinate argument required to support its crucial second premiss.\textsuperscript{4}

Using Quinn’s numeration of the propositions involved, the reformulation proceeds as follows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(4)] Necessarily, if some being is God, then that being is worthy of worship.
  \item[(5)] It is not possible that some being is worthy of worship.
  \item[(6)] It is not possible that some being is God.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{1} Rachels, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{2} In his critique of Rachels, Quinn seems to treat all the obligations in question as moral (p. 5).
\textsuperscript{3} But in a recent discussion of some of these same issues, Quinn speaks of the obligation to obey God as a special kind of ‘religious obligation’. This possibility introduces a complication which will be discussed below.
\textsuperscript{4} Quinn, p. 12.
To support premiss (5), he initially offers the following subordinate argument:

(7) It is not possible that some being is worthy of worship and that there are some moral agents.

(8) Necessarily, there are some human moral agents.

The final version of the subordinate argument for (5) runs:

(10) It is not possible that both (a) that some being is worthy of worship and also (b) that it is possible that there are some human moral agents.

(9) Necessarily, it is possible that there are human moral agents.

From the start, there are some differences between Quinn’s reformulation and the one suggested earlier. In the main argument, the latter makes explicit a number of things that Quinn and Rachels leave implicit (cf. the rationales given after each of the premisses is introduced). There are also differences in the logical form of the subordinate arguments. A more serious divergence occurs in the respective ways the two reformulations understand the content of the subordinate argument. There is some reason to think that Quinn’s various versions of that subordinate argument do not accurately represent Rachels’ views.

Problems begin as early as (7). This proposition seems to change the status quaestionis. As Rachels formulates it, the issue is not whether human moral agents can possibly coexist with a being worthy of worship. What is at issue, rather, is the compossibility that a being worthy of worship exist and that moral agents not be required to abandon (or not violate) their roles.

There may be some kind of connection between whether or not a moral agent exists and whether or not he is obliged to abandon his role. If the agent in question could and did fulfil the obligation to abandon his role, he would no longer exist in that role. Role abandonment would be a kind of annihilation of the person, under a certain description. But there is no logical necessity that a moral agent who is obliged to abandon his role actually abandon it. Thus, there can exist moral agents whether or not they are obliged to abandon their roles.

Having altered the status quaestionis, the subordinate argument for (5) that Quinn first devises requires Rachels to assert that some moral agents necessarily exist. But (8) is highly implausible and, surely, Rachels has no need of it.

There is another problem in that Quinn seems to misunderstand what Rachels means by the term ‘autonomous moral agent’. This causes him to resort to replacing (7) with (10) and, consequently, (8) with (9). The latter replacement he admits is a ‘somewhat drastic expedient’.

The danger of confusing being an autonomous agent and being virtuous (i.e. always acting as an autonomous agent ought to act) has already been

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1 Quinn, p. 3.
noted. The reasons Quinn gives for having to reformulate (7) seem to suggest that he might have confused them. He notes that ‘most people in fact act in unprincipled and unreflective ways often enough that they cannot approve of all their own conduct in their own hearts’. Quinn concludes from this that ‘most of us, much of the time, are not in fact fully fledged moral agents’. But this conclusion does not follow. In fact, most of us are, much of the time, fully fledged moral agents. What most of us hardly ever are is fully virtuous. A person is an autonomous agent in that he can act conscientiously, not in that he does so act.

In Quinn’s view, the subordinate argument with (10) and (9) for its premisses and with (5) for its conclusion is a valid argument. But he thinks it is unsound. It is unsound because (10) is false and ‘demonstrably’ so. The latter claim is proved by showing that the denial of (10) follows from a truth which Rachels supposedly admits combined with an obvious truism when these are substituted in a valid modal logical schema.

The damaging truth which Rachels supposedly admits is:

(23) It is possible that some being is worthy of worship and that this being issues no commands and that it is possible that there are human moral agents.

The second and ‘obvious’ truth is:

(24) That some being is worthy of worship and that this being issues no commands and that it is possible that there are human moral agents entails that some being is worthy of worship.

The modal logical schema is:

(25) (Possibly (p and q) and (p and q entails r)) entails possibly (p and r).

From these can be inferred the denial of (10), namely

(26) It is possible both (a) that some being is worthy of worship and also (b) that it is possible that there are human moral agents.

Quinn seems to attribute (23) to Rachels on the basis of the following quotation. ‘Even if God did not require obedience to detailed divine commands, the worshipper would still be committed to the abandonment of his role as a moral agent if God required it.’ Rachels is here responding to someone who would avoid the alleged inconsistency between worship of God and moral autonomy by claiming that God does not in fact issue commands. If there are no divine commands, then obedience to divine commands would not be a problem. Rachels’ point seems to be that, even if God did not actually issue commands, it would remain logically possible that he do so. In which case, it remains logically possible that some moral agent might have to abandon his role. But, Rachels insists, it is impossible that any moral agent be so required (cf. premiss (1c), above).

It is here that the difference between talk about the nonexistence of moral

1 Quinn, p. 3.
2 Quinn, p. 21.
3 Quinn, p. 7.
4 Quinn, p. 5.
5 Rachels, p. 178.
agents and talk about their not being required to abandon (or violate) their roles makes an important difference. Proposition (23) might well be admitted by Rachels, but it is hard to see why he should think it damaging. If a fitting object of worship exists there might also exist moral agents. But they would exist with the abiding possibility of a requirement that they abandon (or violate) their roles.

In addition to his attempt at a formal refutation of Rachels’ argument, Quinn also presents an argument to show that no divine command could possibly conflict with the demands of moral autonomy.1 The strategy he uses in similar to one used in an earlier critique of Rachels offered by Robert A. Oakes.2

There are reasons to think that neither Oakes nor Quinn is successful in his attempt to exclude the possibility of conflict between divine commands and moral autonomy as Rachels seems to interpret them.

Rachels’ view is that obedience must be qualified if it is to square with the demands of moral autonomy. Worship, on the other hand, requires unqualified obedience. Oakes specifies a single condition which he thinks would qualify or limit morally autonomous obedience. He seems to allow that worship requires and that moral autonomy forbids obedience when the condition obtains. But he argues that it is logically impossible for God to issue a command when it obtains.

The unique condition Oakes places upon the obedience of a morally autonomous agent is that what he is commanded not be something morally wrong. He then notes that God is necessarily perfectly good.3 This is thought sufficient to make it impossible for God to command an immoral action. Hence, the moral autonomy of any divine worshipper remains intact. ‘Since God is perfectly good, he would not require us to do anything except what is right.’4

Again, there is no denial here that worship (by definition) requires obedience even when what is commanded is wrong. Neither is it denied that some possible object of worship might command wrong actions. Nevertheless, a ‘perfectly good’ God could not so command. Hence, no worshipper of God could ever find himself being required to do something morally wrong. Thus, ‘there can be no incompatibility between obeying God and fulfilling our moral commitments’.5

1 Neither Oakes nor Quinn explicitly states which premiss of Rachels’ argument is falsified by the truth of the claim that a divine command could never conflict with moral autonomy.
2 Quinn refers to Oakes’ article in a footnote (Quinn, p. 10). These two critics are here understood to be urging different, though related, arguments for why obedience to God cannot conflict with moral agency. Oakes focuses on the claim that a perfectly good being cannot command what is morally wrong. Quinn focuses on the claim that a perfectly good being cannot command something which the recipient has good reason to believe is morally wrong.
3 Oakes, p. 167.
4 Oakes, p. 166. The quotations attributed to Oakes are part of his paraphrase of the second of the five objections which Rachels raises against his own view. Since Oakes claims that this objection is ‘fatal’ to Rachels’ argument (Oakes, p. 167), there is nothing inappropriate in putting some of the words of Rachels’ presentation of it in Oakes’ mouth.
But is it true that, were a worshipper to be commanded to do something objectively wrong, his compliance would ipso facto involve him in a violation of his role as an autonomous moral agent? It is possible that he might believe, mistakenly but with good reason, that what was commanded was morally right. And that would be a case in which doing what is objectively wrong did not involve a violation of moral autonomy. And is it true that a worshipper violates moral autonomy only if he does something that is objectively wrong? He might believe, mistakenly but with good reason, that what was commanded was morally wrong. And that would be a case in which doing what was objectively right involved a violation of moral autonomy.

This is consistent with the understanding of moral autonomy presented earlier. It was noted that doing what was objectively right was neither necessary nor sufficient for acting as an autonomous moral agent. The qualification which Oakes specifies does not seem to be included in Rachels’ understanding of the concept. Whether or not the thing commanded is morally right does not determine whether or not an autonomous moral agent acts in violation of his role. Such an agent need not be any the less ‘the man of integrity’ in doing something objectively wrong. Nor is he necessarily the man of integrity in doing something objectively right. What matters is whether or not he is acting in a way he can ‘conscientiously approve in his own heart’.1 On Rachels’ account of the matter, the moral autonomy of the divine worshipper’s obedience to God is not ipso facto guaranteed by the fact that a perfectly good God cannot command anything wrong. Showing that God’s commands cannot conflict with moral autonomy understood in a way other than Rachels understands it does not constitute a refutation of Rachels’ view.

This leads us to Quinn’s attempt to falsify the claim of inconsistency between divine obedience and the demands of Kantian moral agency. His strategy is the same as that of Oakes, but he places a different limitation on moral autonomy. His requirement is that the thing commanded not be an action morally unacceptable to a well-informed agent. ‘Theists have a good reason for supposing that God would not, indeed could not, command anything which a well-informed autonomous human moral agent should be unable to accept.’2

The concept of what is unacceptable to a well-informed autonomous agent needs further clarification. In this same context, Quinn speaks of such commands as if they were synonymous with commands contrary to the agent’s ‘reflective moral judgements’.3 Presumably, a person will have formed a (negative) reflective moral judgement about an act if and only if he has ‘good reasons for believing that it would be morally wrong to perform that act’.4 This suggests that the kind of divine command Quinn wishes to

1 Rachels, p. 177.
2 Quinn, p. 8.
3 Quinn, p. 9.
4 Quinn, p. 12.
preclude is any one which requires an agent to do something that he has good reason to believe is wrong.

Quinn, then, seems to be asserting that it is incompatible with his perfect goodness for God ever to command anything contrary to an agent's reflective moral judgement. Thus, it is impossible for God to command an action when the recipient has good reasons to believe it would be morally wrong.

There is no question but that a divine being cannot command anything objectively wrong. But why cannot a divine being command something that someone has good reason to believe is wrong? It does not seem to be a logical truth that an action is wrong if some well-informed human agent reflectively judges that it is wrong. Quinn himself elsewhere notes that 'even reflective moral judgements are fallible'.

From the fact that God could never command any wrong action it does not follow that he could never command anything contrary to an agent's reflective moral judgement. What, then is the 'good reason' theists have for thinking that God could not command contrary to their reflective moral judgements or demand something that they have good reason to believe is morally wrong? After all, the judgements might be mistaken. It does not seem inconsistent with the divine goodness to command actions that are morally right.

It is, of course, possible to claim that a perfectly good deity could never command a worshipper to do something, even something morally right, when the conditions were such as to compromise Kantian moral agency. More specifically, it might be thought wrong to command something morally right when the recipient was known to have good reason for believing that what was commanded was wrong. In which case, a perfectly good being could no more command a right act in such circumstances than he could command a wrong act in any circumstances. Quinn, at one point, entertains something similar to this view. His 'Kantian theist' believes that it is impossible for God to command someone to 'relinquish his moral autonomy' and justifies this on the grounds that 'God's power to command is necessarily limited by his perfect goodness'.

This defence would surely establish the required consistency between obedience to divine commands and Kantian moral autonomy, despite its appearing ad hoc. But some theists might think that it makes Kantian theories of moral agency a bit too easily compatible with traditional theistic beliefs. Accepting a Kantian theory of the demands of moral agency seems to prevent God from commanding things that are objectively morally right.

1 Quinn, p. 13.
2 Quinn, p. 111. Here, again, there may be some ambiguity. If we take 'relinquish' to mean 'abandon', the case Quinn is referring to is the rather special one in which God supposedly commands a person to abandon his role as moral agent. On the other hand, the issue might be whether or not God could command a person to act in violation of his role as autonomous moral agent, i.e. to do something inconsistent with moral autonomy.
This has a further implication. Among the actions that are morally right are those that are morally required, independent of any question of their being commanded by God. On the present view, it would be wrong for God to command someone to perform an action that was objectively morally required whenever God knew that the person reflectively judged the action to be wrong.

The view that makes it possible for God, in virtue of his perfect goodness, to command things that are objectively morally required might be questioned by theists. Some of them believe that God commands everything that is morally required and forbids everything that is morally prohibited. And this need not be because they maintain a divine command theory of moral obligation. Thus, R. M. Adams notes that, while there are some theists who believe that ‘the moral rightness or wrongness of actions consists in agreement and disagreement, respectively, with God’s commands,...’ even theists who do not hold this metaethical view do generally believe that all right action is commanded by God and should be done in obedience to him’.1 In short, theists of the sort described by Adams maintain that an action is morally required if and only if God commands it. They would, therefore, have a problem with any theory holding that God’s perfect goodness made it logically impossible for him to command something morally required. Even a theist who believed that God commanded only some things that were independently morally required might have difficulty in accepting the present constraint.

This suggests that God’s perfect goodness might not limit his right to command in ways that perfectly parallel the limitations on obedience imposed by Kantian theories. If a theist did not think that God’s perfect goodness was limited in that way, it would remain possible that God command something contrary to the reflective moral judgement of an agent. If worship requires such obedience while Kantian moral autonomy forbids it, then there is a conflict between the demands of worship and the demands of Kantian autonomy. Of course, all this proves is that Kantian moral agency is incompatible with traditional theism. But need the theist invest in the Kantian theory of moral agency?

There is another possible defence of Quinn’s contention that God ‘could not command anything that a well-informed autonomous human moral agent should be unable to accept’. On this approach, the claim is not interpreted as broadly as it was above. There it was taken to preclude the divine command of a right action whenever the human agent was known to have good reason to think the action wrong. The view now advanced

narrow the impossibility to only a subclass of the right actions judged wrong by a human agent. Furthermore, the reasons for the impossibility that God command acts in the subclass in no way depends upon the moral legitimacy of issuing such commands. Rather, it has to do with the effectiveness of so doing. It is not God’s moral goodness that comes into play, but rather his practical wisdom. Roughly, the argument claims that God could not succeed in communicating his command if that command, however objectively right, was in conflict with certain of an agent’s reflective moral judgements.

Presumably, when God communicates himself to someone, the latter will have reason to believe God has spoken. Quinn admits that ‘it seems possible that a theist should have both good reasons for believing that God has commanded him to perform a certain action and good reasons for believing that it would be morally wrong for him to perform that action’. Quinn here means to describe a situation in which the reasons the agent has for believing that a divine command has been given are just as good as the reasons he has for believing that the action is wrong. In such an instance, the believer would be in a very uncomfortable dilemma.

But the epistemic situation need not be perfectly symmetrical. It is possible that, though there are good reasons for each of the relevant beliefs, the reasons on one side might be better than the ones on the other.

Some philosophers would altogether deny that the reasons an agent might have for believing himself to be the recipient of a divine command could be as good as or better than the good reasons he might have for thinking the commanded action wrong. Quinn’s discussion of Kant shows that he is not one of them. Nor does Quinn deny the possibility that the good reasons an agent has for believing that an action is wrong might be better than his reasons for thinking he has been issued a divine command. He allows that an agent might, mistakenly, decide that he had not been given a divine command when the content of the purported command was something he

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1 Quinn, p. 12.
2 There is some ambiguity about the situation so described. Does it follow from the fact that someone has good reason for believing that something is the case that he believes that it is the case? If so, Quinn is describing a situation in which someone is simultaneously entertaining contradictory beliefs. This may be thought impossible, at least in cases in which the contradiction is as close to the surface as it is here. Inasmuch as the person believed that he had received a divine command, he would also believe what is obviously implied by this, viz. that the command was right. But he also has good reason to think that the action commanded is wrong. Perhaps it is best to understand the concept of ‘good reasons for believing’ in a way that does not entail that the person believes what he has good reason for believing. In ordinary language, there seems to be a slight difference between saying that a person has good reason to believe something and saying that he has good reason for believing something. The latter suggests more strongly than the former that the agent actually believes the thing in question. But this is far from a strict distinction in common parlance.
3 Quinn, pp. 12–16.
4 It should be obvious that, on the view being espoused here, a person can have good reasons to believe something that is false and that his reasons to believe something false can be better than his reasons to believe something true.
judged was wrong.¹ 'What could be more natural... than using reflective moral judgements as touchstones for determining which claims to moral authority might plausibly be regarded as divine?'²

In case the reasons for believing that the action was wrong were better than the reasons for believing that God had commanded it, the agent might be allowed or even required by reason to disbelieve that he had been issued a divine command. He cannot consistently believe that the action is wrong and that God commanded him to do it. Of course, the recipient of a putative divine command can understand and accept the logical distinction between objectively wrong actions and actions judged wrong by himself or any other human agent. Unfortunately, it is not a distinction he can apply in his own case at any given time. Practically speaking, an action he believes wrong is wrong. The agent also takes it to be a necessary truth that God never commands wrong actions. Thus, in the possible situation just described, the theist would be quite reasonable in rejecting the belief that God has commanded the action.

Now, it might be that in situations in which the evidence was asymmetrical in this way, God could never successfully communicate his commands. Hence he would not issue them in such circumstances. In the sense now specified, they would be commands that the human agent would be 'unable to accept'.

Of course, as Quinn notes, the epistemic situation is not always asymmetrical in the same way. In the case just discussed, the evidence in favour of the moral belief was better than the evidence for the belief that God had spoken. But this is only one of three possibilities. The reasons for a person’s moral judgement might be less weighty or equally weighty as his reasons for thinking he has received a divine command.

On this account, Quinn would not preclude divine commands contrary to an agent’s reflective judgement when it was foreseeable that the evidence for his having been given a divine command was ‘epistemically preferable’ to the evidence he had for the reflective moral judgement.³

Even in cases in which the evidence would prove epistemically symmetrical, God might still issue a command. On the assumption that symmetrical evidence does not necessarily lead to inaction, it might be possible for God to foreknow whether or not the recipient of the command would obey it. In case it would be obeyed, God would have reason to issue a command.

Thus, there will remain some instances in which God will command an agent to do something that the agent has good reason to think it would be

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¹ Quinn appears to place no limits on the possibilities in which the belief in a divine command might dislodge a moral belief. But he might allow some moral views to be such that no evidence for a contrary divine command could possibly dislodge them. This might be the case when paradigmatic moral beliefs are in question, e.g. that gratuitous cruelty is wrong. Perhaps these are the ‘hard core’ moral beliefs that Quinn refers to (Quinn, p. 6).
² Quinn, p. 9.
³ Quinn, p. 14.
wrong to perform. He does so when he knows that the evidence that a divine command has been issued will outweigh or counterbalance the agent’s evidence that the action to be commanded is wrong.

Unfortunately, even in the case in which the balance of reasons tilts in favor of the belief that a divine command has been given, there may be some reason to think that moral autonomy has been compromised. The agent has preferential reason for disbelieving his personal moral judgement because, although there is good moral reason for the judgement, it contradicts what he has better reason to believe is the command of a God who can never command what is wrong.

If someone were to obey a command he believed was wrong, perhaps out of fear of punishment, he would have violated his role as a moral agent. But is it possible that a person may act in violation of his role as moral agent even when doing something that he has preferential reason to believe is right? The answer may be affirmative. Take a case in which immediate compliance with a command is demanded and the agent threatened with a sanction for non-performance. Even if the agent has preferential reason to believe that the command is right, he might still feel violated because he is not being given time to come to understand the error in his moral judgement. This might be very important to an individual, depending upon how central the moral belief had been in his life. It might not be enough to accept that the action was right, it might also be required to understand why it was right and why his former judgement was wrong.

There are ways of reading Rachels’ remarks on moral autonomy which support this conclusion. Abraham’s response to God’s command to kill Isaac is the paradigm of the sort of obedience that Rachels thinks incompatible with moral autonomy. The patriarch is described as being ordered to ‘do something contrary…to his sense of what would otherwise be right and wrong’.1 Rachels takes it as ‘admitted’ that God necessarily commands what is right.2 If we attribute the same belief to Abraham, it follows that his is not a case of violating autonomy by doing something that he believes is wrong. All things considered, he believes that he has been given a divine command. Therefore, he believes that what he has been commanded is right. Yet his obedience is still a violation of moral autonomy. This may be because he is being commanded to do something he would ‘otherwise’ believe wrong. That is to say, if he did not believe that he had been given a divine command to perform the action, he would have believed it wrong. Though he has preferential reason to believe that the action is right, it still requires that he go against ‘his own best judgement’.3

Perhaps an analogy might make the claim more convincing. The recipient of the divine command would be like the student who has carefully worked

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1 Rachels, p. 175.  
2 Rachels, p. 178.  
3 Rachels, p. 177.
out a mathematical problem on his own, but who then notes that the answer key provides a different solution. If he had to answer immediately and were going to be penalized for failing to give the right answer, he might report the one given in the answer key. But the fact that it was correct would not mean that it was in conformity with his present reflective mathematical judgement. His preferential reason for thinking his own answer incorrect is, in a sense, mathematically extrinsic.

It is not altogether clear whether Rachels admits the possibility that a person might violate moral autonomy in doing something he has preferential reason to believe right. He does say, as noted earlier, that the man of ‘integrity’ only does things which he can ‘on reflection, conscientiously approve in his own heart’.1 It does not seem totally implausible to think that acting before one has come to understand the moral rightness of what one is about to do is inconsistent with this.

If this is so, then even the most theistically plausible interpretation of Quinn’s limitation on what God commands will not fully eliminate the possibility of conflict between divine obedience and the demands of autonomous moral agency.2 In which case, Rachels is correct in insisting on the potential conflict between worship and moral agency as he defines it.

Quinn argued that Rachels’ argument was unsound because of the falsity of the subordinate premiss (10). Reasons have been offered to show that (10) is not in any way needed by Rachels to support his conclusion. Nothing similar to Quinn’s proposition (10) appears in the alternative reconstruction that was offered earlier. That argument was declared a valid one. But the question of its soundness remains. If it is unsound, which of its premisses is false?

The case will be made here that there is a second implicit argument involved in Rachels’ disproof of God’s existence. The subordinate premiss (1a) appears to be the conclusion of another argument which is itself unsound. Therefore, in the total argument for (3), a false premiss is implicit. This renders the argument unsound as a whole.

In order to see why a second subordinate argument might be implicit, a bit more attention must be paid to the concept of worship. That concept is far from fully elaborated. It is unclear just what specific properties a being must have in order to be an object of worship. Nor is it clear just what properties a being must have in order to be a worthy or fitting object of worship. These are distinct questions. Rachels claims that God is the unique worthy object of worship. But he is not the unique possible object of worship. Allowance is made by Rachels for objects of worship that are not worthy of

1 Rachels, p. 177.

2 Theists might not, in fact, accept even this narrowed limitation on God’s right to command morally required actions. Perhaps God’s goodness demands that he command what is morally required even when he foresees that the command will not be heeded.
worship. For example, he raises no logical difficulty with the idea of Satan as an object of worship.1

The alleged ‘obligation’ to unqualified obedience presumably attaches to worship as such. Thus, if someone is a worshipper of Satan, it would follow that he ought to give unqualified obedience to Satan. But this hardly seems true if the ‘ought’ is interpreted as a moral ought. That, however, is the way it must be interpreted if Rachels’ argument is to avoid invalidity through equivocation. These remarks suggest both what the premisses of the second subordinate argument are and what is wrong with it.

The first unexpressed premiss is:

(1d) Necessarily, if there is some autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is a fitting object of worship, then there is some autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is an object of worship.

It seems to be necessarily true that a being cannot be a fitting object of worship unless it is an object of worship.

(1e) Necessarily, if there is some autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is an object of worship, then there is an autonomous moral agent who ought to give unqualified obedience to the commands of someone else.

This merely articulates part of what it means to be a worshipper, be it of God or Satan.

Premiss (1a) follows from (1d), and (1e). It is an interim conclusion and need not be included among the premisses of the main argument. The proposition (3) which Rachels seeks to prove follows from (1-1), (1d), (1e), (1b-2), and (1c-1). This argument seems to be valid; it is, however, unsound. Premiss (1e) is false, if the ought is interpreted as a ‘moral’ ought.

In his critique of Rachels, Quinn treated the obligation to obey the commands of a (fitting) object of worship as if it were a moral obligation. In a more recent discussion of some of the same issues, Quinn suggests that the obligation to obey God might not be a moral one but, rather, a distinctive kind of ‘religious’ obligation.2 This suggests the possibility that the obligation to obey an object of worship might itself not be a moral obligation but a religious one. If the obligation to obey an object of worship is not a moral obligation, then the term ‘ought’ will have been used equivocally in the reconstruction of Rachels’ argument. That would render it invalid.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Rachels never specifies the nature of the obligation he associates with worship. This suggests that he might never have intended the obligation associated with worship to be taken as a moral one. It also suggests the possibility of an argument for

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1 Rachels, p. 174 n. 10.

Rachels’ conclusion which acknowledges the diversity in the mode of obligation. Such an argument might begin with premisses (1-1) and (1d), above, and proceed as follows:

(1e) Necessarily, if there is some autonomous moral agent for whom someone else is an object of worship, then there is an autonomous moral agent who has a religious obligation to give unqualified obedience to the commands of someone else.

(1f) Necessarily, if there is an autonomous moral agent who has a religious obligation to give unqualified obedience to the commands of someone else, then (it is possible that) there is an autonomous moral agent who has an obligation which overrides the moral obligation he has not to violate his role.

(1g) It is not possible that there is some moral agent who has an obligation which overrides the moral obligation he has not to violate his role.

This argument would also validly conclude to the necessary non-existence of God. Again, the obligations will have to be taken as actual and not merely _prima facie_ obligations. Neither is overridden in its own realm. Furthermore, it must be possible to make a judgement that one obligation overrides another even when the two obligations in question are ‘incommensurable’.¹

Rachels sometimes speaks as if he might agree with a line of argument like this. ‘The role of worshipper takes precedence over every other role which the worshipper has – when there is any conflict, the worshipper’s commitment to God has priority over any other commitments which he might have.’² On the other hand, ‘the first commitment of a moral agent is to do what in his own heart he thinks is right’.³

Quinn might have problems with (1g). In his defence of the possibility of conflicts between moral and other obligations, he faults those who insist on ‘defining moral requirements as those that would be overriding, if there were conflict’.⁴ Nevertheless, it is common for philosophers to make the overriding quality of the obligation in question at least a necessary condition for its being a moral obligation.

Whether or not this argument is sound remains an open question. What is interesting is that the introduction of the possibility of a distinct kind of religious obligation might provide moral arguments of the sort Rachels advanced with a new lease on life rather than rendering them invalid because of equivocation.

Quinn admits that the idea of religious obligations conflicting with moral obligations is a disturbing one. But he does not think that the possibility is easily excluded. He does raise the possibility of some account of God’s nature ‘that would serve as a basis for a positive insight into the possibility of requirements arising from divine commands coming into…conflict with

¹ Audi, p. 205.
² Rachels, p. 178.
³ Rachels, p. 178.
⁴ Audi, p. 204 n. 11.
moral requirements'. 1 He then claims that no human is capable of giving such an account.

It might, however, not be impossible to give a very sketchy explanation for why it is that God could not command anything that was contrary to morality. Let us take it as a necessary truth that God is loving, i.e. that he loves equally all those who are members of the moral community. This need not be taken as an analyticity claim. Perhaps it can be treated as an identity whose terms are ‘rigid designators’. 2 Necessarily, the one and only being that is divine is identical with the one and only universally equibenevolent being. Quinn’s claim that this is something that no human can know might be accommodated by attributing this knowledge about God to his free self-revelation. The statement might be taken as a way of understanding the striking assertion that ‘God is love’ which appears in the first of the Johannine epistles. 3

It might be argued further that if God has equal love for all the members of a community, then he wishes them to treat each other impartially. He does not want any of them to treat the interests of one as more important than that of any other. But there are many moral philosophers, even those with different moral theories, who claim that an essential characteristic of the moral point of view is that it judges conduct with respect to impartiality. Differences in moral theory, e.g. those between contractarians and utilitarians, can be looked upon as being due to different ways of modelling impartiality. If this link between universal love, impartial treatment, and the desire for compliance with morality can be made out, it would seem to follow that God could not command any human agent to treat another in a way that was contrary to morality. This still allows God to make demands, even difficult demands of people, but they would largely be matters of moral indifference or supererogation. Thus, for example, some great good might, perhaps, come of Kierkegaard’s remaining celibate. Hence the ‘divine veto’ on his marriage. But there is a considerable difference between thinking that God could command Kierkegaard not to marry Regine Olsen and thinking that God could command him to murder her!

1 Audi, p. 205.
3 1 John 4: 16.