

Moral Autonomy and Unconditional Submission to God: *Response to Choo*

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Abstract: A number of prominent commentators construe the concept of worship in such a way that it commits the worshipper to unconditional submission to God. One might think, however, that construing worship in this way implies that the worshipper's moral autonomy will be undermined. In this paper I respond to and reject a recent argument by Frederick Choo that attempts to show that it's false that unconditional submission to God undermines the worshipper's moral autonomy.

Keywords: Worship, Moral autonomy, God

1. Introduction

A number of prominent commentators construe the concept of worship in such a way that it commits the worshipper to unconditional submission to God. One might think, however, that construing worship in this way implies that the worshipper's moral autonomy will be undermined. In this paper I respond to and reject a recent argument by Frederick Choo¹ which attempts to show that it's false that unconditional submission to God undermines the worshipper's moral autonomy.

The plan for the paper goes as follows. In section 1, I present what I call "The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship". This argument (if correct) shows that, since unconditional worship to God undermines the worshipper's moral autonomy, God cannot be worthy of worship. In section 2, I present Choo's argument to show that a crucial premise of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship is false. In section 4, I argue that Choo's argument to demonstrate the falsity of this premise is unsuccessful. Specifically, I show that the analogy that Choo appeals to in order to

¹ Choo "Can a Worship-Worthy Agent Command Others To Worship It?" (2022).

motivate his response to The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship fails in an important and illuminating, way. In section 5, I summarize my results.

2. The Argument Against Worship

As I noted at the outset, a number of commentators construe the concept of worship in such a way that it commits the worshipper to absolute or unconditional submission to God. For example, according to Scott Aikin², when the worshipper worships God, the worshipper enters into a relationship that is characterized by total obedience. As Aikin puts it, the concept of worship is such that that the worshipper not only places “the greatest trust” in God, but also enters into a relationship with God that is characterized by “the acceptance of the most complete dependence”.³ Elsewhere Aikin claims that the concept of worship demands that the worshipper be “unconditionally obedient”⁴ to God’s commands and injunctions. Indeed, on Aikin’s analysis, resisting God’s command isn’t simply a failure of obedience; it is a sin. Echoing Aikin, Rachels⁵ claims that the concept of worship is one in which the worshipper recognizes that God has absolute authority over her life, which in turn entails that God has an “unqualified claim”⁶ on the worshipper’s obedience. And again, on Rachels’ analysis, the concept of worship is such that it that commits the worshipper to “total subservience to God”,⁷ where “total subservience” means that God’s commands are not to be “judged, challenged, defied, or disobeyed”.⁸ To do any of these things is, on Rachels’ analysis, incompatible with taking God to be the object of worship.

On Aikin and Rachels’ analysis, thus, worship is an *obedience-entailing* concept, i.e., one that demands unhesitating and unquestioning compliance on behalf of the worshipper. Worship, that is, demands of the worshipper that she set aside her personal beliefs and moral convictions, acknowledge the supreme authority that God has over her life, and submit unconditionally to God’s commands. Worship is, as Aikin puts it, “*all in*”.⁹ Hence, we can think of Aikin and Rachels as endorsing what I will call the TOTAL SUBMISSION THESIS:

² Aikin (2010, 101–113).

³ (*Ibid.*, 104).

⁴ (*Ibid.*, 111).

⁵ (Rachels, 1971, 325–337).

⁶ (*Ibid.*, 334).

⁷ (*Ibid.*, 334).

⁸ (*Ibid.*, 333).

⁹ Aikin (2010, 104). Italics added.

TOTAL SUBMISSION THESIS (TST): For any worshipper S , act ϕ , and time t , if God commands of S that she do ϕ at t , then S must set aside her personal beliefs and moral convictions, submit unconditionally to God, and automatically do ϕ at t .

In this connection we might think of the prophet Abraham, whom Rachels believes is the ideal worshipper, as Abraham “obeyed without hesitation”¹⁰ when commanded by God to sacrifice his own son. Indeed, says Rachels, Abraham obeyed God’s command to sacrifice his son even though God commanded him to do something that was contrary to his sense of right and wrong.

As Aikin and Rachels point out, however, a commitment to TST generates the following worry. Suppose that God is worthy of worship and commands of some worshipper S that she do some act ϕ at time t . If God commands of S that she do ϕ at t , then (by TST) S must unconditionally submit to God and automatically do ϕ at t . But, if S must submit to God and automatically do ϕ at t , then S will be required to give up her moral autonomy at t . But to require of S that she give up her moral autonomy is *wrong*. To be a morally autonomous agent is, by definition, to be a *self-governing or self-determining agent*, i.e., the kind of agent that has the freedom to think, decide, and act independently. To be a morally autonomous agent means that, instead of heeding or automatically accepting the commands of others, “you think things through, you do what’s right by your best lights, and that your actions are ones that come from you in the sense that you can be responsible for them.”¹¹ But now, since it’s wrong to require of S that she give up her moral autonomy, God cannot be worthy of worship. Simplifying things somewhat, we can formalize the worry as follows:

The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship:

- (1) God is worthy of worship. (assume for *reductio*)
- (2) If (1), then, for any worshipper S who believes that God is worthy of worship, S must (by TST) unconditionally submit to God and automatically obey his commands.
- (3) If S must unconditionally submit to God and automatically obey his commands, then S is required give up her moral autonomy.

¹⁰ Rachels (1971, 332).

¹¹ Aikin (2010, 104).

(4) But: *S* is not required to give up her moral autonomy.

(5) Therefore, God is not worthy of worship.

3. Choo's Response

Premise (3) of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship says that unconditional submission to God implies that the worshipper must give up her moral autonomy. Frederick Choo has recently suggested that premise (3) is false and that unconditional submission to God need *not* imply that the worshipper must give up her moral autonomy. But now, since (3) is false, The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship fails.

Choo's argument to show that premise (3) is false goes as follows. According to Choo, the worshipper believes that God is (among other things) a supreme moral authority who can "create legitimate moral obligations"¹² for the worshipper. But if the worshipper believes that God is a supreme moral authority that can generate such obligations, then the worshipper will rightly unconditionally submit to God and do what God "obligates him to do".¹³ But the worshipper's unconditionally submitting to God need not imply, as premise (3) says, that the worshipper is somehow giving up her moral autonomy. Rather, by submitting to God, the worshipper is simply acknowledging that God is a supreme moral authority whose commands *ought* to be followed.¹⁴

A slightly fuller way of stating Choo's point would be as follows. According to Choo, the worshipper believes that God is in a maximally strong epistemic position with respect to the moral domain in the sense that God knows the truth-value of all propositions within the moral domain and doesn't believe any false propositions within this domain. Moreover, since God is in a maximally strong epistemic position with respect to the moral domain, the worshipper will rightly take God to be a moral authority – a *supreme* moral authority – who can generate objectively binding moral

¹² Choo (2022, 88).

¹³ Choo (2022, 88).

¹⁴ So, for example, suppose that some worshipper believes that God is a supreme moral authority who can generate objectively binding moral obligations. Suppose also that God issues a command that contradicts one of the worshipper's moral beliefs. In such a case, the worshipper would, says Choo, be obligated to revise her moral belief "upon hearing the command and act accordingly" (2020, 88). But this, says Choo, isn't a case where the worshipper's *moral autonomy* is undermined. Rather, this is simply a case in which the worshipper is acknowledging that God is a supreme moral authority whose commands *ought* to be followed.

obligations for the worshipper. But now, if the worshipper believes that God is in a maximally strong epistemic position with respect to the moral domain who can generate objectively binding moral obligations, then the worshipper will¹⁵ rightly believe that she ought to set aside her own personal moral judgments and unconditionally submit to God. But the worshipper's submitting to God need not imply, as premise (3) says, that the worshipper is somehow surrendering or giving up her moral autonomy. Rather, unconditional submission to God is simply an acknowledgement by the worshipper that God is a supreme moral authority whose commands *ought* to be followed.

Choo attempts to motivate this line of thought by drawing attention to the fact that we routinely submit to or obey authorities in the nonmoral or descriptive domain. In his response to the worry¹⁶ that unconditional submission to God undermines the worshipper's moral autonomy, Choo suggests that this should not be a source of concern since we routinely submit to authorities in the nonmoral domain. Says Choo:

Indeed, both Aikin and Rachels admit that there are cases where we can defer to others or obey authorities. As Akin notes, we can defer to a person when we believe that the person is in a better epistemic position than us; and we obey authorities "on the basis of the legitimacy of the institutions they represent".¹⁷

Although Choo doesn't develop this line of thought, the suggestion here seems to be that it's often appropriate for us to submit to (for example) the cognitive authority of professors, teachers, and mechanics, and to the institutional authority of police officers, government agents, and judges in the court of law. It's appropriate to submit to such authorities because we recognize that they are individuals who, because of their advanced education and training, are in a very strong epistemic position with respect to their domain of expertise and, as such, are highly likely to form true beliefs and avoid false beliefs within that domain. Moreover, when we obey, submit to, or carry out the commands of an authority, it's not the case that we're surrendering or giving up our autonomy. Rather, we're simply acknowledging that, in virtue of their expertise and advanced training within some domain, the relevant authority has a status that we lack and that, accordingly, we have a duty or obligation to submit to that authority.

But now (Choo's argument seems to go), what holds for nonmoral submission to

¹⁵ In accordance with TST.

¹⁶ Choo (2022, 88).

¹⁷ Choo (2022, 89).

an authority holds also for moral submission to God. Since, as we've just seen, nonmoral submission to an authority is often appropriate and need not undermine one's autonomy, unconditional submission to God by the worshipper is *likewise* appropriate and need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy. But if unconditional submission to God need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy, then premise (3) of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship must be false since, we can recall, that premise says that unconditional submission to God implies that the worshipper *must* give up her moral autonomy.

4. Response to Choo

Call Choo's claim that unconditional submission to God need not imply that the worshipper must give up or surrender her moral autonomy *the target claim*. As I've already noted, if Choo's target claim is true, then premise (3) of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship is false. Let's provisionally set aside the target claim and examine first Choo's sub-argument for the claim that it's *appropriate* for the worshipper to submit unconditionally to God. As I'll argue below, since Choo's sub-argument for this claim fails, Choo is unable to reach the target claim. But if Choo is unable to reach the target claim, then we're left without a reason for thinking that premise (3) of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship is false.

As I've already noted, Choo claims that it's often appropriate for us to submit to or obey authorities with respect to the nonmoral domain. Let's grant Choo this claim. Let's grant, that is, Choo's claim that nonmoral submission to an authority is often appropriate, where (for our purposes) an "authority" is simply someone who has a strong track record of being right about questions within their domain of expertise and, as such, has earned a certain exalted status associated with that domain. As we've also seen, Choo thinks that since nonmoral submission to an authority is often appropriate, unconditional moral submission to God is *likewise* appropriate; since, in other words, it's often appropriate for the nonexpert to submit to an authority with respect to some nonmoral domain, *so too* it must be appropriate for the worshipper to submit unconditionally to God with respect to the moral domain. Choo, thus, appears to be advancing the following sub-argument. Since:

(p1) Nonmoral submission to an epistemic authority by the nonexpert is often appropriate.

it must be the case that:

(p2) Unconditional moral submission to God by the worshipper is appropriate.

Choo's argument is *prima facie* plausible. As the attentive reader will notice, however, a crucial assumption is embedded in the inference from (p1) to (p2), viz., the assumption that nonmoral submission to an authority functions *just like* or is *relevantly similar to* moral submission to God. More precisely, in order to make the inference from (p1) to (p2), Choo must assume that:

(p3) The underlying dynamics involved in nonmoral submission to an authority function just like or are relevantly similar to the underlying dynamics involved in moral submission to God.

Put simply, in order to make the inference from (p1) to (p2) Choo must assume that a *broad functional symmetry* holds between nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God.

Choo very much needs (p3) to be true, for if (p3) is false – that is, if nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God do *not* function in a relevantly similar way – then it's exceedingly difficult to see how Choo is able to infer (p2) from (p1). If, in other words, nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God are in some important sense functionally disanalogous, then Choo can't very well point to examples of the former kind of submission to support and motivate examples of the latter kind of submission.

In what follows, I want to suggest that (p3) is in fact false and that nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God do *not* function in a relevantly similar way. But since (p3) is false, Choo is unable to make the inference from (p1) to (p2) and establish the claim that unconditional submission to God is appropriate.

To begin, let's say that a nonexpert *submits* or *defers to* an authority when the nonexpert accepts some proposition solely on the authority's say-so or testimony. Formally:

For any nonexpert *S*, authority *E*, and proposition *p* about which *E* is an expert, *S* submits or defers to *E* when (i) *S* believes that *E* is an expert with respect to *p*, and (ii) *S* adopts *E*'s belief that *p* solely on the basis of *E*'s say so (or testimony), and not because of the reasons that ground or evidentially support *p*.

As I've already pointed out, it's often appropriate for the nonexpert to submit or defer to an authority. It is, in other words, appropriate for the nonexpert to assign *special epistemic weight* to the testimony of an authority. It's appropriate because the nonexpert recognizes that the authority is, in virtue of her knowledge, advanced training, in a very strong epistemic position with respect to her domain of expertise and, as such, is highly likely to form true beliefs and avoid false beliefs within that domain. Thus, by adopting the authority's beliefs with respect to some domain, the nonexpert maximizes *her* chances of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs within that domain. As Zagzebski puts it, if I submit to an authority I believe that what the authority "believes or testifies is more likely to give me the truth than if I try to figure it out myself."¹⁸ Moreover, there's an obvious practical benefit to submitting to an authority; by submitting to an authority, the nonexpert eliminates the need to undertake an independent and possibly time-consuming inquiry into some domain. As Jäger puts the point:

There is no doubt that our intellectual lives widely and fundamentally depend on the intellectual labor of others.... In many cases, however, we *deeply* depend on others, since we ourselves lack the resources to attain knowledge or understanding of a topic that concerns us.¹⁹

Authorities are a significant epistemic resource, for without them the nonexpert would know very little about the world around them. Submission to an authority, thus, is a much smarter bet than what we might call "epistemic autonomy", i.e., the idea that the nonexpert should refrain from forming her beliefs on the say-so of others. If the nonexpert *were* to pursue a policy of epistemic autonomy for all her beliefs – if, in other words, the nonexpert were to systematically *distrust* the testimony of authorities – the nonexpert would, it seems, succeed in holding a set of "relatively uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore *irrational* beliefs".²⁰

An important feature underlying nonexpert submission to an authority deserves to be highlighted, viz., that when a nonexpert submits to an authority, the nonexpert always submits *conditionally or provisionally*. When the nonexpert submits to an authority, there is always the presumption that the nonexpert can push back against the authority's claims, check to see if the authority's claims are true, ask for a

¹⁸ Zagzebski (2016, 187–194, 187).

¹⁹ Jäger (2025, 6) to appear in *Oxford Handbook of Social Epistemology*, ed. Jennifer Lackey & Aidan McGlynn. Page citation retrieved from: <https://philpapers.org/archive/JGEEA.pdf>

²⁰ Hardwig (1985, 335–349, 340).

justification, or, if the circumstances require it, file a complaint against the authority to whom the nonexpert defers. Aikin makes precisely this point:

In every case of deference, we defer on the basis of our recognition that the person to whom we defer has a certain status. Additionally, in these cases of deference, *we only defer conditionally*, we may defer now, but we can always fact check later or voice a complaint.²¹

Aikin's point here is clear; submission to an authority is always conditional or provisional. When the nonexpert submits to an authority, there is always the presumption that the nonexpert can ask for a justification or explanation for the action, command, or injunction issued by the relevant authority, and that, when asked, the relevant authority *can and will* provide the requisite justification or explanation. In short, nonexpert submission to an authority never collapses into total obedience or slavish servitude.

So, for example, suppose that Smith accepts his doctor's injunction to quit smoking and exercise more. Smith's acceptance of his doctor's injunction is plainly conditional; Smith may accept his doctor's injunction now, but there is always the presumption that Smith can, if he so chooses, ask his doctor for an explanation as to why he ought to quit smoking and exercise more, and that, when asked, Smith's doctor *can and will* provide the requisite explanation. Likewise, Jones may accept the judge's guilty verdict and subsequent criminal sentence. But Jones' acceptance of the judge's verdict and criminal sentence is conditional; there is always the presumption that Jones can, if he so chooses, ask the judge to provide an explanation or justification for her verdict and sentence and that, when asked, the judge *can and will* provide the requisite justification.

Matters appear to be altogether different, however, when it comes to moral submission to God. When the worshipper submits to God, she does *not* do so conditionally or provisionally. Rather, and as I pointed out in Section 2, worship is an obedience-entailing concept that requires unconditional submission. More exactly (and as TST makes explicit), when God commands of some worshipper that she do some act ϕ at a time t , the worshipper is required to set aside her personal beliefs and moral convictions, acknowledge the supreme authority that God has over her life, and automatically do ϕ at t . This is so even if doing ϕ goes against the worshipper's carefully considered moral judgments about what is right and wrong. Thus, unlike the standard cases of nonmoral submission involving doctors, lawyers, and law enforcement officials, submission to God *does* in fact collapse into

²¹ Aikin (2010, 105–106).

total obedience or slavish servitude. Indeed, this is precisely Aikin and Rachels' point.

An account of worship that is wedded to TST, thus, brings into sharp focus a distinctive feature of submission to God; with a doctor, mechanic, or police officer, there is always the presumption that the nonexpert can always ask for a justification or explanation for the commands made by such authorities, but not so with God. God demands total obedience or unquestioning compliance such that the possibility for the worshipper to ask God for a justifying reason for his commands and injunctions is *eliminated entirely*.

5. The Upshot

What does the foregoing show? It shows that, since nonmoral submission to an authority is always conditional or provisional, whereas moral submission to God is *unconditional* and requires total obedience, (p3) above must be false, i.e., nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God do *not* function in a relevantly similar way.²² But if (p3) is false, then Choo's inference from (p1) to (p2) is blocked and Choo is unable to establish the claim that unconditional moral submission to God by the worshipper is appropriate. Put differently, since it's *false* that a functional symmetry holds between nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God, Choo is unable to infer (p2) from (p1) as the inference from (p1) to (p2) *depends upon* the claim that a functional symmetry holds between nonmoral and moral submission. Hence, Choo's sub-argument fails to establish the claim that unconditional moral submission to God is appropriate.²³

²² Indeed, it's difficult to conceive of how the underlying dynamics of nonmoral and moral submission could be *more* dissimilar.

²³ I should note that Choo appears to be aware of the worry raised here, but quickly dismisses it by claiming that the distinction between conditional and unconditional submission "confuses matters" (p.89). According to Choo, it's true (as TST makes clear) that the *concept* of worship requires unconditional submission. But, says Choo, the *decision* to submit to God is wholly conditional and depends upon whether the worshipper believes that God is the sort of being that deserves to be worshipped. This shows, says Choo, that since the worshipper "exercises their moral autonomy" (p.89) when deciding whether to submit to God, submission to God is conditional after all and does not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy.

This response is baffling. I do not deny that submission to God is conditional in the sense that *if* the worshipper believes that God is the sort of being that deserves to be worshipped, *then* the worshipper must submit to God. But this is not the relevant sense of conditional submission. In the sense that is under discussion, to say that an agent *S* "conditionally submits" to an expert *E* with respect to some proposition *p* is to say that *E* can and should provide the relevant justification or explanation for *p* *if S asks for it*. But, as I've already pointed out, submission to God is clearly not

But now, and this is the central point, since Choo has failed to establish (p2), i.e., the claim that unconditional moral submission to God is appropriate, Choo is consequently unable to reach the target claim that unconditional submission to God need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy. This is because Choo has failed to provide us with a reason for thinking that unconditional submission to God is appropriate *in the first place*. That particular claim, it seems, is wholly without support and entirely unmotivated. But if Choo is unable to reach the target claim that unconditional submission to God need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy, then Choo's argument to show that premise (3) of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship is false fails.

Stated generally, we can put the point like this: As we've seen, Choo wants to establish the claim that unconditional submission to God is appropriate and need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy. He does this by way of analogy; since, says Choo, nonmoral submission to an authority is often appropriate and need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy, *so too* unconditional submission to God is appropriate and need not undermine the worshipper's moral autonomy. But, as I've argued, nonmoral submission to an authority and moral submission to God are functionally disanalogous; nonmoral submission is conditional whereas submission to God is *unconditional*. Hence, Choo can't appeal to instances of the former to motivate and justify instances of the latter. But if that's so, we are then left without a reason for thinking that premise (3) of The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship is false.

It's important to note that I'm fully prepared to grant Choo the claim that the worshipper is able to engage in independent moral reflection, form moral judgments, and otherwise "engage her rational faculties".²⁴ I'm also prepared to grant Choo's claim that God could issue "highly abstract"²⁵ commands that would provide the worshipper with significant freedom about how she ought to fulfill those commands. To be clear: the argument in this paper has nothing to do with whether God micromanages or meddles with the worshipper's daily life, nor with whether the worshipper is able to reflect independently upon the nature of morality, nor with the frequency, type, or specificity of God's commands.²⁶ These matters are peripheral to the aims of this paper. Rather, the aim of this paper is intended to draw

conditional in this sense. Rather, submission to God is *unconditional*. Since this is so, the possibility for the worshipper to ask God for a justifying reason for his commands is eliminated entirely. Choo's response is therefore irrelevant to the worry developed in this paper.

²⁴ Choo (2022, 87).

²⁵ Choo (2022, 87).

²⁶ Choo (2022, 87).

attention to a deeply troubling consequence for any account of worship that is wedded to TST, viz., that an account of worship that is wedded to TST will require of the worshipper that she *turn off her moral judgments* and automatically do what God commands. It is exceedingly difficult to see how an account of worship that requires of the worshipper that she turn off her moral judgments and automatically do what God commands is one in which the worshipper is in any meaningful sense a *self-governing or morally autonomous agent*. Since this is so, we must conclude that an account of worship that is wedded to TST is one that undermines the worshipper's moral autonomy after all. Hence, and contrary to Choo, The Aikin/Rachels Argument Against Worship is not only deductively valid, but sound as well.²⁷

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