

# Personal and non-personal worship

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## Introduction

Can we worship a non-personal god? Often it is assumed not. For instance, it has been argued that worship is only suitable if God can hear, respond to or acknowledge our worship. Since a non-personal god can do none of these things, it must be inappropriate or conceptually confused to worship such a God. Moreover, it has been suggested, even if people *do* try to worship non-personal gods, there can be little value to this practice. As Brian Leftow puts it, there is no criteria by which we can prefer druid chanting to communal vomiting as a means of worshipping a non-personal god.

After summarising what I call ‘the conceptual argument’ against non-personal worship, which I draw from work by Michael Levine (1994) and Brian Leftow (2016), I offer two responses in defence of non-personal worship. First, I suggest, the account of worship which the conceptual argument employs is too narrow. Since it rules out certain conceptions of worship which play an important role in Abrahamic traditions, I argue that it is unfair to use it to build a conceptual case against non-personal theism. Even if this is the case, however, we must show that the conceptual argument is more than a definitional disagreement, for the term, ‘worship’ is notoriously difficult to define. Secondly, then, by building on Nicholas Wolterstorff’s (2016) work on the epistemological value of liturgy, I argue that we can give some objective criteria for why certain forms of non-personal worship are preferable to others.

I begin with some quick clarifications. Throughout, I will refer to ‘non-personal theism’, a ‘non-personal god’ and ‘non-personal worship’ and I intend this to refer fairly broadly.<sup>1</sup> Whilst Leftow’s and Levine’s arguments, focus on a certain kind of pantheism or naturalistic pantheism, according to which God and the universe are identical, it will not be crucial for my argument to be any more specific since what I say applies to any conception of god which is not personal. By the term, ‘god’, here I simply mean to refer to something like, the ultimate reality (whatever that might be). And by ‘non-personal theism’, I simply mean any conception of God which thinks that the ultimate reality is non-agential and is lacking a mind and a will (plug in your preferred definition of ‘person’ here). Secondly, most of what I say does not draw on actual examples of non-personal worship, but, rather, I primarily focus on the conceptual *possibility* of such worship. My attempt is not to defend some version of non-personal theism, but, rather, to show that it might, in principle, be appropriate to worship a non-personal god if such a god exists.

## The conceptual argument against non-personal worship

Can we worship a non-personal god? In asking this question, I do not simply mean to ask an empirical question about whether some individuals happen to worship non-personal divine beings, but, rather, I am asking a question which relates to the appropriateness or coherence of such worship. As Michael Levine put this point,

the fact that worship occurs in Buddhism, Taoism or among some atheists does not suffice to show that worship is conceptually *appropriate*...In asking if one can worship something non-personal, one is not asking whether people do in fact worship what is ordinarily taken to be non-personal, but rather whether it is conceptually appropriate to do so. (1994, 326)

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<sup>1</sup> Leftow’s account of naturalistic pantheism consists of two key claims: (i) ‘God and the universe are identical’ (2016, 64), and, (ii) ‘the universe at its basic level consist entirely of the basic entities of physics, and its laws are those only of physics’ (2016, 66).

We might further specify this question, following Brian Leftow, by asking two subsidiary questions: is it a ‘fit, sensible...and not nonsensical’ response to worship a non-personal god? That is, we might ask about its conceptual appropriateness (2016, 70). And we might also ask whether a non-personal god is *worthy* of worship, that is, we might ask some question about the moral fittingness or goodness of worshipping such a god. To clarify: There might be some actions which are conceptually appropriate but morally impermissible, such as worshipping Satan, to borrow from Leftow (2016, 70). Whilst Satan is presumably capable of being worshipped, if he exists, what is problematic about such worship is that Satan does not deserve to be worshipped (at least according to most religious traditions). In this paper, I focus primarily on the question of conceptual appropriateness and leave issues of moral permissibility for another occasion. As it turns out, I think these issues are difficult to separate—the primary aim of the paper, however, is to show that focusing on conceptual issues is unfairly begs the question in various respects against non-personal conceptions of God. If my argument is successful, then future discussions of non-personal worship will drop the language of conceptual appropriateness altogether and focus only on issues of worship worthiness.

Let us think more carefully about this notion of conceptual appropriateness. A helpful way to make sense of Leftow’s claim that certain actions are unfit or not sensible is to describe it as a kind of ‘category mistake’. Thus, to take Gilbert Ryle’s (1949) famous example, in visiting a University’s Economics Department, Theology Department, Administration Building, and sports facilities (and so on...), if a person then asks: ‘I’ve seen all of the departments and buildings, but where is the University?’, she makes a category mistake—for there is no more to a University than its various departments and facilities. Thus, to speak of the conceptual inappropriateness of worshipping a non-personal god is to claim that although some people try to worship non-personal gods, something is going wrong in this kind of action, since the person makes a category mistake in applying the concept of worship to a non-personal god. Note that if we can show that worshipping a non-personal god is a category mistake, then the moral issue need never arise. For instance, as Leftow puts it, ‘Nothing can deserve worship if trying to worship it cannot accomplish the point of worship’ (2016, 71).<sup>2</sup> The reason we should think of non-personal worship as a category mistake, according to the conceptual argument is that the point of worship is to address the object of worship, and since a non-personal god cannot be addressed, it makes no sense to think of such practices as worship.

Let’s examine some versions of this kind of argument in more detail. I summarise this argument against non-personal worship as follows:

#### CONCEPTUAL ARGUMENT:

1. Worship requires a form of address in which we say things to the object of worship (through hymns, prayers or declarative statements).
2. For an address to count as a conceptually appropriate form of address, it is necessary that we are heard and understood by the object of address.
3. A non-personal god cannot hear and understand us when addressed.
4. Therefore, it is conceptually inappropriate to worship a non-personal god.

Why think that this argument is sound? Premise 3 seems obviously true; built into the definition of ‘non-personal’ offered in the introduction is the idea that such a god is non-agential and lacks a mind. Since it seems obvious that *hearing* and *understanding* are capacities that only things with

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<sup>2</sup> As noted, I think there is something a little artificial about this distinction between conceptual and moral issues. As I will return to at the end of the paper, the two issues clearly have some connection. Spoiler: my recommendation is that future discussions of worship focus only on issues of worship worthiness and that questions of conceptual appropriateness are laid to one side.

minds can possess, premise 3 seems difficult to dispute. Let's examine the other two premises, then.

Premise 1 concerns the definition of the term 'worship'. Shortly, I will consider some reasons to be sceptical of the definition offered here, but first, let us consider why someone might hold to this premise. Leftow states that his definition of worship is 'obvious given actual religious practice' (2016, 71) and consists of two claims. First, 'worship is a form of address: when we worship *we say things to* what we worship. We sing hymns *to* God; we pray *to* God; we declare *to* God our belief in Him... The point of the practice is for these words to be heard and understood' (2016, 71; emphasis in the original). And, second, 'worship always involves praising, at some point. Practice makes this clear, but it's even part of the word's etymology: it is from the Anglo-Saxon *worth-ship*, the proclaiming of worth.' (2016, 71). Thus, on Leftow's account, premise 1 is clearly necessary, but not sufficient for a definition of worship. That is, one cannot worship something without addressing it, but not all address counts as an act of worship. Levine makes some similar points. He cites Ninan Smart's definition of worship, that 'In worship one addresses the focus of worship... worship is a relational activity; one cannot worship oneself' (1972, 11, 26; quoted in Levine 1994, 314). Expanding Smart's claims. Levine writes that, 'the idea that worship is fundamentally relational and addressed to a personal deity is not often disputed' (1994, 315). So, both Levine and Leftow clearly affirm premise 1 and they do so for similar reasons. The thought seems to be that all instances of worship in various religions appear to depend on an individual addressing the object of worship in some minimal kind of way, so this must be fundamental to the concept.

What about premise 2? Whereas premise 1 concerns the definition of the term 'worship', premise 2 asks what it would be for worship to be successful. Consider Leftow remarks, for instance:

Nothing can deserve worship if trying to worship it cannot accomplish the point of worship. It cannot accomplish the point of worship to address something which cannot be aware of or understand what we say. Thus things which cannot be aware or understand are not conceptually appropriate objects of worship. Only something able to be aware of and understand us can count as God. (2016, 71)

Similarly, on this point, Levine writes that what makes certain kinds of non-personal worship inappropriate or unsuitable is that 'worship, and especially prayer, are basically directed at "persons" – or at a being with personal characteristics separate and superior to oneself... Objects of worship... are generally taken to be conscious, personal and superior' (1994, 315). It is clear that both are thinking of worship, and thereby, address as success terms. Whilst one might address a typewriter or a cup of coffee by directing a second-personal speech act towards it (I often begin my day by saying: 'you are the most beautiful cup of coffee', for example), there is something strange or conceptually off about such practices.

Why might someone think that such address is misguided or expressing a Gilbertian category mistake? Leftow considers a question similar to this in considering the possibility of 'pantheist-friendly worship' (2016, 73) of the kind which does not depend on the possibility of addressing a God who can hear or understand such address. The problem with such 'worship', Leftow thinks, is that there are no objective success criteria for its performance, even if people attempt to engage in it. As he colourfully describes it, '[n]othing makes Druid chanting at Stonehenge more appropriate as... worship than collective vomiting, save perhaps our tendency to find chants more uplifting' (2016, 76-77). The point appears to be this: it is difficult to see what makes one form of address directed towards a non-personal god any more appropriate than another. Such a god cannot prefer one form of address to another, nor can it stipulate that forms of address are more effective by means of some form of divine revelation. Leftow is right to push this problem here. If non-personal conceptions of God are to be taken seriously as

religious ways of life, then we should have some account of worship which is not entirely subject dependent. Yet, at least on first appearance, any account of worship directed at non-personal gods would appear to run into this problem, simply because there is no person to acknowledge or receive the address, making its practices worryingly subjective.

In what follows, I give some reasons to reject the premises of this argument and show that the conceptual argument cannot show it to be a category mistake to worship a non-personal God. Thus, the central issue which should be addressed is the moral permissibility or goodness of non-personal worship.

### **The definitional response to the conceptual argument**

In this section, I give reasons to be sceptical of premise 1 of the conceptual argument (Worship requires a form of address in which we say things to the object of worship (through hymns, prayers or declarative statements)). I will suggest that this definition of worship is too narrow, even in cases of worship in the Abrahamic traditions and, thus, it should not be used to rule out the appropriateness of non-personal worship. If we can show that it is not always a category mistake to worship non-personal objects, then the conceptual argument will not be successful.

First, it is important to note that in many theological traditions, it is common to distinguish between the practices of worship and the attitude of worship. Put simply, the attitude of worship is a mental state in which one has certain beliefs, desires and emotions which are directed towards something's or someone's greatness and worth. For instance, as Nicholas Wolterstorff defines it, 'an attitude of worship'

is a particular mode of Godward acknowledgement of God's unsurpassable greatness. Specifically, it is that mode of such acknowledgement whose attitudinal stance toward God is awed, reverence, and grateful adoration. Christians do not enact the liturgy in order to placate God, they do not enact the liturgy in order to keep themselves in God's good graces, they do not enact the liturgy in order to keep their ledgers on the positive side, they do not enact the liturgy in order to center themselves. The assemble to worship God. Facing God, they acknowledge God's unsurpassable greatness in a stance of awed, reverential, and grateful adoration. (2015, 26)

We can note already that if this is a definition of worship, then it doesn't include anything like premise 1 of the conceptual argument. Whilst address might be the most appropriate form of expressing Godward acknowledgement, it doesn't seem definitionally crucial for Wolterstorff. That is, while Wolterstorff clearly agrees with Leftow that *praise* is constitutive of worship (in some sense), it doesn't seem obvious that address is necessary.

The practices of worship (corporate liturgy, hymns, religious rituals, and so on) are a series of acts in which a person manifests this mental state in their behaviour. These can come apart. For instance, whilst many people engage in practices of worship regularly, say, by taking the Eucharist at their parish church, many do this without desiring God's goodness or believing that God is worthy of praise. They may simply engage in these practices for cultural reasons, or to pacify a family member.<sup>3</sup> It also seems possible to have an attitude of worship without ever engaging in the practice of worship. For instance, as Michelle Panchuk (2018) notes in her discussion of religious trauma, many individuals who are shamed by the Church through experiences of abuse believe that God is worthy of worship and might desire to worship God,

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<sup>3</sup> The minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible are full of examples in which the people of God are engaging in the right kinds of practices in wrong the kinds of ways. That is, the people of Israel are engaging in immoral behaviour outside of these liturgical practices which means that their liturgical acts are invalid to God. In other words, whilst the practices of worship are present, the attitudes of worship misfire (See Amos 5:21-25, for instance). Thanks to an anonymous referee for this clarification.

but often cannot engage in the practices of worship because of a feeling or belief that they are themselves unworthy to engage in such practices.

Now, the conceptual argument appears to conflate the practices and attitudes of worship. Or else, its primary concern is with showing that it is conceptually problematic to engage in the practices of non-personal worship. Yet, if we focus only on the practices of worship, then it seems difficult to make sense of claims like the Apostle Paul's claim in The Epistle to the Romans: 'in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship' (Romans 12: 1). Whilst Paul clearly holds there to be an object of offering or presenting (*παροστίσαι*),<sup>4</sup> it is not clear that Paul is primarily concerned with a form of addressing God here, but, rather, with a way of relating to God which pervades all aspects of one's life. As the Anglo Catholic Theologian, Evelyn Underhill writes, 'Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the response of the creature to the Eternal: nor need we limit this definition to the human sphere...worship may be overt or direct, unconscious or conscious.' (1936, 3). To claim that worship always involves conscious intentional address seems to use a definition of worship which is not applicable to all instances of worship, even within the Christian tradition.

However, let us assume, for the sake of charity, that we should be concerned not with the attitude of worship, but with specific practices. Do these always involve some form of addressing God? I am sceptical that they must (is fasting an act of worship? Plausibly. Does it always involve address? Plausibly not) but let us grant this claim for the sake of argument. Even if we grant this focus only on the practices of worship, the Bible seems to suggest that it is possible for us to worship things other than God. For instance, the second commandment states that

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4)

The implication of this commandment is that, whilst engaging in the practice of worship directed towards things other than God is possible, it is not permissible. That is, a plausible way of interpreting these claims is to say that whilst one does not make a category mistake in worshipping things other than God, there is something morally bad about doing so. Indeed, if it were a category mistake to worship things other than God, it would seem strange for Scripture to morally condemn such actions in the first instance.<sup>5</sup> But the Biblical passages concerning idolatry seem to be premised on the claim that worship of things other than God is morally bad, precisely because it is a conceptually appropriate thing to do. What is morally problematic about idolatry is that something other than God is being regarded as the object of worship; something that is not worthy of one's worship is taking the place of something which is.

We might respond to this claim by noting that the commands condemning idolatry primarily concern the moral impermissibility of worshipping other gods. Thus, we might think, what makes it conceptually appropriate to be idolatrous is that we are addressing other gods who we at least think are capable of responding. That is, we might claim that all instances of idolatry can be explained through forms of personification or the mistaken belief that the object of one's worship is the kind of thing that can be addressed.

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<sup>4</sup> With thanks to an anonymous referee for this clarification.

<sup>5</sup> Remember that here I am responding only to the conceptual argument against non-personal worship and not the moral argument.

However, I do not think this response will suffice. Idolatry seems to be a problem which covers more than the worship of other gods. It seems possible to value things other than God in this way—plausibly, idolatry refers to the worship of money (as Christ states in the Gospel according to Matthew: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)), the worship of self the worship of sex. It would seem strange to suggest that when people are engaged in idolatry that they are always addressing some object of worship.

This is a point made by James K.A. Smith (2009), in his recent work on cultural liturgies. Smith suggests that human beings are, by default, worshipping creatures; the novelist David Foster Wallace puts this point succinctly: ‘[t]here is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship’ (2009, 7). As Smith suggests, the rituals which pervade our society—social media, online shopping, marketing campaigns are all competing liturgies, or practices of worship, which seek to instil in us a kind of attitude of worship towards a certain human ideal. The practices of our culture are manifestations of the worship of money, prestige and individual autonomy. Smith argues that one of the crucial roles of Christian practices, then, is to challenge these other kinds of worship and to orientate our actions towards worship of some object which is worthy of worship, namely, God.

I take it that the account of worship described by Smith is broadly compatible with the claims Scripture makes about worship and idolatry. But if the account of worship described in premise 1 of the conceptual argument is plausible, it would seem to follow that the kind of worship Smith and Wallace are describing are not really worship at all. This suggests that idolatry of money, or self is wrong because it is a kind of category mistake: one does not sufficiently grasp the concept of worship if one is worshipping money, since on this view worship always involves address. Yet, as Smith shows in some detail, the kind of idolatry which pervades the practices of worship of secular culture appear to be very effective at promoting the ideals of a certain culture. If worshipping money were simply a category mistake, it would seem strange for it to have such power, and for it to be so morally problematic. For the only real problem with idolatry, or so it would seem, is that one had made a conceptual mistake, analogous to thinking that the University was an entity over and above its department. It is unclear to me why we should think of idolatry as so detrimental to the Christian life if this is the case.

The picture of worship which is painted in Jewish and Christian Scripture is arguably one of competing objects of worship which are conceptually appropriate but yet not morally equivalent. This seems to put pressure on an account of worship which is defined only in terms of certain practices, and more specifically, just in terms address. The view of worship represented in the argument above is misconceived and far too narrow, even to capture ways that worship is described in Judeo-Christian traditions. Such a position assumes that worship is primarily an intentional action which involves addressing a being capable of acknowledging address. Such a definition rules out the possibility of worshipping a non-personal god but it also rules out describing idolatry as a form of worship. Moreover, it also rules out thinking of worship as more than a set of practices, which seems problematic if we are told to worship God with our whole lives.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I think the conceptual argument is simply confused about what counts as worship.

However, I do not think that this will suffice as a response to the conceptual argument. So far, the discussion has revolved around a disagreement over the use of the term ‘worship’. If Leftow and Levine simply reject the broad account I have been outlining, then we have reached an impasse. The term worship is notoriously difficult to pin down and is used in a variety of

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, this view of worship also appears to rule out forms of worship which are practiced outside of Western religious traditions. For the term ‘worship’, in the broader sense of the word I have been using it, is used to describe the practices of religious traditions across a number of cultures. To employ this definition of worship seems only to capture a very narrow set of religious practices within the Abrahamic traditions and not exclude the broader concepts of worship employed both within and outside these monotheistic traditions.

ways by a variety of people.<sup>7</sup> Whilst I think Wolterstorff's definition of worship (or something similar) is broadly correct, from hereon in we'll assume that Leftow's definition of worship is right in examining premise 2.

### **The weak worship response to the conceptual argument**

In this section, I attempt to show that there is a form of non-personal worship which is conceptually appropriate, even if we accept that worship must involve address.

To show how a form of address might be compatible with non-personal worship, it will first be helpful to say more about what we mean by 'address'. Wolterstorff makes a distinction which is relevant for our purposes here, in suggesting that we can distinguish between 'strong address' and 'weak address' (2015, 57). The difference being that in the strong case, we address 'someone in the expectation or hope that one's addressee will realize that they are being addressed' (2015, 58). And in 'weak address' we address someone or something without such expectation.

As Wolterstorff notes, there are examples which appear to be instances of weak address (even though he stays agnostic on whether weak address is actually possible). Wolterstorff writes that in animal blessing ceremonies, for instance, 'the priest refers to them [the animals] with the second-person pronoun "you". Naturally the priest does not expect that the creatures he refers to as "you" will realize that they are being blessed...So too a priest might pronounce a blessing over someone in a permanent coma, referring to the person as "you," with no expectation that the person will apprehend that she is being blessed' (2015, 57). Wolterstorff highlights some examples of other instances of weak address, such as addressing mountains, or people in vegetative state.

Now, the conceptual argument seems to assume either: that the kind of address involved in worship must always be strong address, or else that weak address is always conceptually inappropriate in worship. If the claim defended in premise 2 is that worship requires strong address, and that it can never be conceptually appropriate to strongly address a non-personal god, then this seems obviously true. Strong worship (that is worship that involves strong address) seems ruled out by definition for the pantheist and other versions of non-personal theism. This is hardly a surprising objection. Indeed, Leftow sees this kind of objection coming. As noted previously, Leftow thinks that what makes *weak worship* problematic is that there are no objective criteria by which one can think of worship as a success term. As he puts it, '[n]othing makes Druid chanting at Stonehenge more appropriate as...worship than collective vomiting, save perhaps our tendency to find chants more uplifting' (2016, 76-77).

However, I think there are plausible responses that can be made on behalf of non-personal conceptions of God which can help to present a case for having objective success conditions for worship. In order to give an account of objective value in weak address, I consider a recent proposal from Wolterstorff (2016) who gives an account of Christian liturgy as a means of gaining object knowledge of God. I suggest that with some small modifications, Wolterstorff's account has potential to give some objective success conditions for a non-personal form of worship which involves weak address.

Let us consider the question of how addressing a *personal* God could have greater or lesser epistemic value. First, we can make a distinction between three different types of knowledge to help us answer this question. Analytic epistemology has typically focused on propositional knowledge, a kind of knowing-that something is the case (such as my knowing that Innsbruck is in Austria). However, there has also been some attention given to a kind of practical knowledge, such as knowing-how to ride a bike. Whilst there is contention in whether practical knowledge is reducible to, or supervenes on, propositional knowledge, there is at least some distinction between these kinds of knowledge, or two means of acquiring knowledge. A third

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<sup>7</sup> With thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

kind of knowledge which is receiving increasing attention in philosophical literature is commonly called ‘object knowledge’—one has object knowledge of a person, a plant, a certain object when one knows the character of that thing—or what it is like. Again, whilst there is some contention about to analyse object knowledge, at least some philosophers have argued that object knowledge is not reducible to propositional knowledge.

To explain what it is to have object knowledge of something, Wolterstorff appeals to the vivid depiction of painting found in James Elkin’s *What Painting Is*. Elkins describes a kind of know-how which is an important part of painting, which cannot be taught by appealing only to propositions about painting but must be learnt by repeated practice. Yet, as Wolterstorff presents it, Elkins also has something like an account of object knowledge of paint. Elkins writes,

There is so much to learn about even the simplest substances (1999, 34)... Each paint [has] its particular feel, its quirks and idiosyncrasies, or it cannot take its place in the mixtures and bleedings [of the painter] (1999, 67)... [Paint offers] a lifetime of things to learn... [and] generations of wisdom to absorb; after all, the substances are impossibly complex (1999, 180)

Wolterstorff suggests that what Elkins comes to know in his learning how to paint is a kind of ‘knowledge of paint’, or, more specifically, ‘knowledge of the character of different paints, what different paints are like, how different paints act and react, their powers and dispositions.’ (2016, 7). He suggests that we can generalise from this observation to object knowledge more generally. Whilst there is clearly a profound difference between the character of some paint and the character of some person, he suggests that all objects have a kind of character which can be known. Moreover, Wolterstorff suggests, object knowledge comes in degrees—one can know a person or a particular paint more or less well.

Wolterstorff goes on to give a more precise account of person-knowledge as a species of object knowledge. The precise details are not important for our purposes here. His key claim is that, knowing a person involves having an object-knowledge of what that person is like. Arguably, there is more to knowing a person than having object knowledge of what that person is like. For instance, as Bonnie Talbert (2015) argues, knowing a person is grounded in our knowing-how to engage that person, along with having experienced them in a variety of circumstances and environments. Whilst clearly what Wolterstorff describes as ‘person-knowledge’ is necessary for knowing a person, I doubt that it is sufficient. Thus, here I simply refer to ‘object-knowledge’ of a person in order to avoid this issue.

Object-knowledge of a person is ordinarily gained through our experience of that person, or perhaps, as some philosophers have claimed, by reading narrative about that person.<sup>8</sup> Wolterstorff thinks that one specific way that we can gain object-knowledge of the Christian God is by addressing God in liturgy. First, he notes that in the actions involved in liturgical worship, there are many things which are taken for granted. For instance, by strongly addressing God by using the second-personal pronoun, ‘you’, ‘The participants engage God in second-person address. In doing so, they take God to be the sort of being whom it is appropriate to address. They take God to be a “thou,” a person. (2016, 11). Throughout liturgy, participants take various things for granted about God in how they speak about him and engage him; for instance, ‘the participants...take for granted that God is capable of listening, that is, capable of apprehending what they say.’ (2016, 12). Wolterstorff argues that if God is in fact this way, then participants have gained a kind of object knowledge of God by using liturgical address.

Moreover, not only does one take certain things for granted about God in liturgy, one also addresses God as being a particular way. For instance, Wolterstorff notes, quoting from the

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<sup>8</sup> See Eleonore Stump 2010, for instance.

*Book of Common Prayer of the American Episcopal Church* (1979), participants of the liturgy recite the following: ‘God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise. At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space...’ (*Book of Common Prayer*, 370). The repetition and use of these *specifications* or *addressee-identification terms* allows participants to gain a knowledge of God’s character—that is, to gain a person-knowledge of what God is like. Thus, Wolterstorff thinks, one way of gaining object-knowledge of God is by addressing God in liturgy.

Wolterstorff’s account seems plausible. For suppose I read a list of detailed statements describing the nature of an individual I have yet to meet every morning. Looking at a photograph of a person, Dave, or simply imagining a generic face in my mind, I may recite ‘Dave you are a kind, generous, intelligent person’, and so on. Suppose that these descriptions are well informed and accurate (a mutual friend might have written this script for me), then I will start to take certain features of Dave’s character for granted. Not only will I gain beliefs about Dave (such as that he is kind and generous), I will also build up a kind of mental picture of what Dave is like in my mind. Whilst this object-knowledge of Dave would surely be much richer if I were to actually meet him in person, it seems plausible to think that in meeting Dave for the first time it would be appropriate to say ‘Dave is just as I imagined him to be’. Thus, if my mental picture of what Dave is like is correct and my script was well informed, then plausibly I have gained object-knowledge of Dave before having met Dave.

Let us consider the applicability to the case of worshipping a non-personal god. First, it is clear that much of Wolterstorff’s account will *not* fit the case of worshipping a non-personal god. Since, as we have already seen, it is not conceptually appropriate to strongly address a non-personal god, object-knowledge of a god who is incapable of listening will be ruled out. But let us assume that non-personal worship involves only instances of weak address in which participants do not hope or expect the object of their address to respond. Might this allow for the kind of object-knowledge which Wolterstorff has in mind? I see no reason why not. Indeed, if it is possible that a painter gains object knowledge of paint over time in which she comes to gain greater knowledge of the character of certain paints, then there is no, in principle, reason to rule out gaining a kind of object knowledge of a non-personal god by means of weak address.

For this account to be successful, we would have to assume that it would be conceptually appropriate for us to regard a non-personal god as an object which has a certain character. Yet, on the naturalistic pantheist account, for instance, there do seem to be things we might plausibly say about God as a unity of all physical existence—for instance, God is vast, expansive, beyond our comprehension, and so on. Furthermore, there are clearly things which are not true of the pantheist God—God is not loving or forgiving, or capable of hearing our prayers, and so on. Thus, plausibly, one might have a greater or lesser degree of object-knowledge of such a god. Indeed, one way in which we might acquire object-knowledge of God in this case, is through certain forms of weak address. That is, it may be possible for us to compose a liturgical script which picks out some features of a non-personal god of which we can gain object-knowledge, even if we do not address God with the hope of response. Repeated engagement with such a practice might thus provide us with an object-knowledge of a non-personal god. Indeed, if Elkins can gain object knowledge of the character of paint through direct interaction with paint, then there seems no reason to think that indirect interaction with a non-personal god would not furnish us with object knowledge.

Consider another example to see the plausibility of such an account. Suppose after meeting Dave he begins to describe various features of his house to me. Suppose his descriptions are accurate and I decide to add to my morning ritual the following statements: ‘Dave’s house, you are warm and cosy; Dave’s house you are small and intimate, Dave’s house you are comfy...’. Whilst this example may feel ridiculous to some, it seems entirely plausible to think that this kind of ritual might provide me with object-knowledge of Dave’s house. Indeed, if we can imagine saying something like, ‘Dave’s house is exactly like I thought it would be’, then

there seems no reason to think that I lacked object-knowledge prior to entering Dave's house, even if this knowledge would be vastly improved in actually experiencing the house.

If this account is plausible, it seems that Leftow is simply incorrect in thinking that there could be no objective reason why some forms of non-personal worship are better than others. If certain forms of address are able to give us object-knowledge of non-personal objects to a greater or lesser degree, then, at least in principle, different kinds of weakly addressing a non-personal god are surely able to give us a greater or lesser degree of knowledge of a non-personal god. More would need to be said about how this point could extend more generally, say, to druid chanting or communal vomiting. Yet, it seems that there are other activities which are able to furnish us with this kind of knowledge—thus, just as certain kinds of painting allow us to gain object-knowledge of paint to a greater or lesser degree, certain non-personal rituals may allow us to acquire object-knowledge of god. And thus, it may be that one reason to prefer druid chanting to communal vomiting is that it provides us with a greater degree of object knowledge of God. Just as we might think that certain traditions or liturgies within the Christian tradition are better or less able to provide us with personal-knowledge of God, we might think that certain practices and forms of address have the potential to give us greater or lesser degrees of object-knowledge of a non-personal god.<sup>9</sup> Whilst much more would need to be done to show just how to establish this, or just why Druid chanting is preferable, there is at least some in principle reason to value such practices.

Thus, in responding to Leftow's claim that there can be no objective value to weak worship, we are able to see that there are forms of address other than strong address than can be thought of as conceptually appropriate. Thus, even if the necessary criteria for a definition of worship offered in premise 1 is true (which I've given reasons to doubt), it doesn't seem to follow that worshipping non-personal gods is always a category mistake. Expanding Wolterstorff's notion of *weak address*, I've argued that such a practice might be both appropriate and objectively valuable, regardless of the worthiness of the object of worship.

## Conclusion

It seems that the conceptual appropriateness argument against non-personal worship is unsuccessful on a number of fronts. First, I've suggested, the concept of worship which is assumed by this objection is too narrow. And secondly, I've suggested that there are no reasons to think that it is conceptually inappropriate to weakly address a non-personal god by appealing to its lack of objective value. I think these are good reasons to suggest that the charge of conceptual incoherence or inappropriateness should be dropped against non-personal accounts of worship. Instead, I think, if one wishes to show that non-personal worship is inappropriate, one should focus entirely on the issue of moral permissibility.

Although I do not have space to respond to this question here, permit me a number of brief comments, which might direct future conversation on the issue. First, as a theist who is committed to the existence of a personal God, it is very difficult for me to have strong intuitions on whether it would be morally inappropriate to offer praise and value to a non-personal god, if personal theism turned out to be false. Much of my intuitions are clouded by the fact that the

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<sup>9</sup> However, it might be objected that we could have no way of knowing whether druid chanting is a better kind of worship than communal vomiting, even if there is a fact of matter about this. This objection does not undermine my reply to Leftow—what we are looking for is some principled objective criteria by which we can say some means of worship is better than another. I have provided an objective criterion, but we might just disagree on the question of whether druid chanting is in fact better than communal vomiting. This does not appear to me to be relevantly different to the problem of which form of worship is more appropriate for a personal God. Whilst it might be true that there are some objective criteria by which we can compare Christian, Jewish and Islamic worship—there appears to be widescale disagreement on who is right about this.

Christian God is more worthy of worship than the pantheist God. But this is not really the issue at stake. The question is whether it would be morally appropriate for pantheists (or other forms of non-personal theism) to worship God, assuming only such a god existed. And so, for the conversation about the worthiness of non-personal gods as objects of worship to proceed, it is important to disentangle the debate from the question of whether a non-personal god is worthier of worship than the Christian God, for instance.

Secondly, as alluded to previously, the distinction between conceptual issues and moral issues cannot always be divided as neatly as my discussion might sometimes imply. Indeed, in the above account of knowing a non-personal god liturgically, I suggested that there may be some epistemic *value* in weakly addressing a non-personal god in liturgy. But this is to say something of the *value* of addressing god, and not just its coherence. And so, in speaking about the coherence of worship, we cannot avoid making value judgements of some kinds. This conversation might also provide the seeds of a response for a non-personal theist. Assuming that some version of moral realism is compatible with some account of non-personal theism, then there might be some moral good in weakly addressing god, namely, the acquisition of object-knowledge. If we think of gaining knowledge as having some moral value, then we can say that worshipping a non-personal god is also of moral value. Of course, such an account might stop short of endorsing an account of ‘worthiness of worship’ as many theists are keen to emphasise. However, there might be scope for thinking that such a god would be of some value, or of some worth.

I do not claim to have entirely defeated the argument against non-personal worship. However, I hope I have shown that focusing on the conceptual appropriateness of worshipping such a god is the wrong way to establish that non-personal worship is inappropriate. To give a robust defence of non-personal worship, I think, the non-personal theist ought to focus her attention on showing why it is morally fitting or good to worship such a god by means of weakly addressing God.<sup>10</sup>

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