

Unconditional Love for God: Ontological Dependence as the Ground of Creaturely Fidelity

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Abstract

This paper argues that the duty to love God is unconditional and irrevocable. Against accounts that ground love in benefit, reciprocity, or outcome, it demonstrates that such models collapse when these conditions are removed. The argument instead grounds the obligation to love God in ontological dependence: the creature exists only by continuously receiving its being from God. This dependence persists under all conditions, including suffering, perceived divine hostility, and hell. Because the relation of dependence remains, the duty that follows from it remains. Scriptural and theological sources are shown to corroborate this structure. Love for God is therefore not contingent but required by the condition of creaturely existence itself.

Keywords: love for God; ontological dependence; agape; divine hiddenness; hell; suffering

Section 1: Introduction

What grounds the duty to love God, and can that duty cease when the conditions ordinarily associated with devotion disappear? Benefits received, experiences of divine care, and the hope of salvation may motivate love for God. Whether they establish an enduring obligation is a separate question. If that obligation depends on their presence, then suffering, divine silence, or the loss of hope may undermine it. An account of unconditional fidelity must therefore explain why love remains obligatory when these supports are absent.

This paper argues that the duty to love God is unconditional and irrevocable because it is grounded in ontological dependence. Within the classical theological framework adopted here, the creature exists only through God's continuous sustaining activity. The central task is to explain why this constitutive dependence calls for love as the creature's proper orientation toward the source of its being. The argument thus concerns both the nature of the Creator-creature relation and the obligation arising from it.

The scope of the claim becomes clearest under three limiting conditions: a life of unrelieved suffering, the experience of divine hostility, and hell understood as final judgment without the possibility of reconciliation or reward. These cases remove benefit, perceived reciprocity, and favorable outcome, respectively. They test whether the proposed ground of obligation can sustain the demanding conclusion that devotion remains owed under every condition in which the creature exists.

Section 2: Conditional Models of Love and Their Failure

Accounts of love for God often proceed from an implicit assumption: that love is justified only under certain conditions. These conditions vary considerably in form, but they share a common structure. Love is understood to arise from, and remain dependent upon, factors such as benefit, reciprocity, accessibility, fulfillment, or favorable outcome. Where these conditions are present, love appears warranted. Where they are absent, love weakens, becomes difficult to sustain, or disappears altogether. The present argument challenges this framework. It contends that any account grounding love for God in conditions external to the Creator-creature relation ultimately renders that love unstable because the conditions upon which it depends can always be removed.

2.1 Conditional Accounts of Love

Recent scholarship on love and reciprocity reflects precisely the conditional structure under examination. Thomas Jay Oord defines love as intentional action undertaken “in sympathetic response to others ... to promote well-being” (Oord 2005). Within this framework, love is fundamentally relational and responsive. It arises in response to another and is directed toward the promotion of flourishing. Similarly, Luigino Bruni identifies several forms of reciprocity, including contractual reciprocity (“*réciprocité sans bienveillance*”), friendship reciprocity (“*réciprocité-amitié*”), and what he terms “unconditional reciprocity” (“*réciprocité inconditionnelle*”) (Bruni 2010, 394–405). Although these forms differ significantly from one another, reciprocity itself remains central to Bruni’s account of social relations. Even the most generous and elevated forms of human interaction continue to be interpreted through categories of mutuality, responsiveness, participation, and exchange.

These approaches illuminate important dimensions of interpersonal love, friendship, and social cooperation. Yet they also reveal a difficulty when applied to the relation between Creator and creature. Oord explicitly defines *agape* as “intentional response to promote well-being when confronted by that which generates ill-being” (Oord 2005). Love therefore remains tied to flourishing, relational response, and the promotion of good conditions. Likewise, Bruni argues that reciprocity fundamentally involves an *aller et retour*, a movement of giving and return, even in its most elevated forms (Bruni 2010, 391). Such frameworks therefore continue to situate love within structures of exchange, responsiveness, mutuality, or benefit.

A similar concern appears in C. S. Lewis’s discussion of the finite loves. In *The Four Loves*, Lewis argues that human loves naturally tend to elevate themselves into absolutes, claiming “divine authority” for themselves (Lewis 1960, Introduction). He

further warns that human loves become destructive when they are granted “the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God,” for once they “become gods,” they also “become demons” (Lewis 1960, Introduction). Even noble forms of affection, friendship, patriotism, and eros can become distorted when elevated beyond their proper sphere. Lewis’s distinction between Need-love, Gift-love, and Appreciative love is particularly significant because it reveals how deeply many forms of human love remain connected to satisfaction, reciprocity, fulfillment, or desire (Lewis 1960, Introduction; chap. 2). Human love often seeks something from its object, receives something from its object, or is sustained by something provided by its object.

Lewis’s analysis does not deny the goodness of these loves. Rather, it demonstrates their finitude. Their dependence upon fulfillment, reciprocity, or satisfaction reveals that they cannot serve as the ultimate model for understanding love of God. To ground love for God in such conditions would be to make devotion contingent upon realities that may disappear. A love that persists only when certain benefits are present remains conditional upon those benefits.

2.2 Agape and the Limits of Reciprocity

Colin Grant argues that agape remains “a unique concept” whose distinctiveness derives “particularly to its theological source and reference” (Grant 1996, 3). In defending Nygren’s emphasis on the uniqueness of agape, Grant cautions against reducing Christian love to alternative paradigms centered on eros or philia. His analysis therefore provides an important corrective to theories that attempt to explain divine love solely through analogies drawn from ordinary human relationships. While Grant does not formulate the ontological argument advanced in this paper, his insistence upon the distinctiveness of agape points toward the inadequacy of purely reciprocal or mutually beneficial models of love when applied to God.

A related rejection of conditional worthiness appears in Tullian Tchividjian's account of grace. Tchividjian argues that grace is fundamentally "one-way love," bestowed independently of merit, deservingness, or reciprocal adequacy (Tchividjian 2013, Introduction). Grace is not earned through achievement, sustained by performance, or conditioned upon proportional return. While Tchividjian develops this claim primarily within a pastoral and theological framework, his emphasis reinforces the rejection of merit and proportional return as necessary conditions of love.

The limitations of conditional models become evident when the conditions that sustain them are removed. If love depends upon flourishing, then radical suffering threatens its intelligibility. If love depends upon reciprocal openness, then divine hiddenness appears to undermine its justification. If love depends upon favorable outcome, then final judgment seems incompatible with continued devotion. Conditional accounts therefore render love most vulnerable precisely under the circumstances in which unconditional fidelity would be most severely tested.

2.3 Divine Hiddenness and Relational Expectations

The conditional assumptions identified above play a central role in contemporary discussions of divine hiddenness. If love is understood primarily through categories of reciprocity, accessibility, mutual recognition, or relational fulfillment, then the apparent absence of such conditions naturally raises questions about the reality of divine love itself. Hiddenness arguments derive much of their force from precisely this assumption.

J. L. Schellenberg provides the most influential contemporary formulation of this position. Schellenberg argues that a perfectly loving God would make a personal relationship available to all capable persons (Schellenberg 1993, esp. chs. 1–3). Since such a relationship requires belief, a perfectly loving God would provide sufficient evidence for belief. The existence

of reasonable nonbelief therefore counts against the claim that God is perfectly loving. The structure of the argument is straightforward. Love entails accessibility. Where accessibility fails, the relationship itself appears defective. Divine hiddenness thus becomes evidence against divine love.

The force of Schellenberg's argument depends upon a particular conception of love. Divine love is modeled on the pursuit of reciprocal personal relationship between independent agents. Such a relationship requires mutual recognition, reciprocal awareness, and a degree of epistemic accessibility sufficient to sustain interpersonal communion. If these conditions are absent, the relationship appears deficient. Yet this framework implicitly assumes that the relation between God and creature is structurally analogous to relations among finite persons. It assumes that God and the creature confront one another as independent agents seeking entry into a mutually recognized relationship.

Contemporary responses to divine hiddenness further illuminate the limitations of reciprocity-based conceptions of divine love. Ebrahim Azadegan distinguishes between agape and eros as competing conceptions of divine love, arguing that eros "requires a personal reciprocal relationship and union with God," whereas agape does not (Azadegan 2014, 103). He further contends that Schellenberg has "incorrect expectations of divine love and the human-divine relationship" (Azadegan 2014, 103). Azadegan's critique is significant because it identifies the underlying relational assumptions that drive many hiddenness arguments. If divine love is understood primarily through the lens of eros, then experiential union and reciprocal awareness become central. If divine love is understood as agape, however, such conditions may no longer be necessary.

This distinction has important implications for the present argument. Agapic fidelity may persist even where reciprocity, experiential reassurance, emotional consolation, or conscious

awareness are absent. Divine love need not cease simply because certain experiential conditions are lacking. Consequently, the absence of those conditions cannot by itself demonstrate the absence of divine love.

Daniel Wiley advances a related criticism. Wiley argues that hiddenness arguments rely upon a correlation between love and openness to personal relationship that “is not as strong as the hiddenness argument demands” (Wiley 2019, sec. 2). Openness to relationship, he contends, is influenced not only by love but also by purpose, circumstance, and broader considerations. The existence of hiddenness therefore does not straightforwardly entail the absence of divine love. Such critiques do not eliminate the experiential reality of hiddenness, nor do they deny the difficulty many individuals experience in the face of divine silence. Rather, they challenge the inference from hiddenness to the failure of divine love itself.

A similar point appears in Travis Dumsday’s treatment of divine hiddenness. Dumsday argues that God may permit certain forms of hiddenness in connection with goods such as responsibility, cooperation, and participation in divine purposes. As he writes, “God, out of love for us, allows us to undertake this task with him” and “God will allow some temporary nonbelief” (Dumsday 2010, 365). Hiddenness therefore need not be understood as evidence against divine love. On the contrary, it may arise precisely within the context of divine love.

For the present argument, if divine love may remain fully operative under conditions of obscurity, silence, uncertainty, or temporary nonbelief, then human love for God cannot be reduced to continual experiential reassurance or reciprocal emotional fulfillment. Fidelity may persist even where consolation is absent.

Taken together, these critiques reinforce a broader conclusion. Conditional models implicitly tie love to accessibility,

reciprocity, responsiveness, or relational fulfillment. Once such conditions are treated as necessary, divine hiddenness appears incompatible with divine love. The resulting tension, however, may arise not from hiddenness itself but from the relational model being presupposed. The difficulty lies not in the fact of hiddenness but in the assumption that divine love must manifest itself according to the same expectations that govern relations among finite persons.

2.4 The Distinctiveness of the Creator-Creature Relation

The argument advanced in this paper rejects conditional frameworks at a more fundamental level. The relation between creature and Creator is not primarily reciprocal, contractual, or mutually negotiated. The creature does not first exist independently and then enter into relation with God. Rather, the creature exists only because it continuously receives its being from God. The relevant relation is therefore ontological before it is reciprocal, metaphysical before it is experiential, and constitutive before it is voluntary. The question is not whether sufficient conditions exist to justify love of God. The deeper question concerns the nature of the relation within which all such conditions arise.

The Creator-creature relation differs fundamentally from such relations. Unlike relationships among peers, it is radically asymmetrical. Ontological dependence is therefore not merely one aspect of the relation among others. It is the constitutive ground of the relation itself.

Thomas Aquinas repeatedly emphasizes this point. God sustains creatures in being “not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being” (ST I, q. 8, a. 1; I, q. 104, a. 1). The creature’s existence is therefore not self-explanatory, autonomous, or self-sustaining. At every moment, its being is received from God.

The present argument therefore rejects the assumption that God and the creature confront one another as independent agents seeking entry into a mutually recognized relationship. Consequently, the Creator-creature relation cannot be adequately understood through categories derived exclusively from relationships among finite agents. The hiddenness argument gains much of its force from importing a peer-to-peer model of relationship into a context where such a model may not be appropriate.

A perfectly loving God therefore does not owe creatures the kind of transparent epistemic accessibility that would make belief effortless or relationship automatic. What appears as hiddenness need not represent a failure of love. It may instead reflect the natural consequence of the infinite exceeding the finite. The demand for continual accessibility projects a peer-to-peer model onto a relation in which one party is the very source of the other's existence. Love for God cannot ultimately be grounded in felt presence, experiential reassurance, or reciprocal awareness. It is grounded in the more fundamental reality of dependence itself.

Where that dependence persists, and it persists wherever the creature exists, the corresponding obligation remains. Schellenberg's argument therefore does not reveal a defect in divine love. Rather, it reveals the inadequacy of interpreting the Creator-creature relation through categories derived from ordinary interpersonal relationships.

2.5 Why Should Dependence Entail Love?

The appeal to ontological dependence invites an immediate objection. Why should dependence upon God override the ordinary relational expectations commonly associated with love, such as reciprocity, accessibility, mutual recognition, responsiveness, and emotional fulfillment? Why should the fact that creatures depend upon God generate an obligation of love rather than merely an acknowledgment of dependence?

The objection is understandable because much contemporary discussion begins from assumptions derived from relationships among finite persons. Within such relationships, love is ordinarily understood as a response to qualities possessed by another individual, benefits received from them, emotional attachment, mutual recognition, or reciprocal concern. Such expectations are entirely appropriate within relations among peers. Yet the Creator-creature relation is not a relation among peers. The objection therefore risks applying standards derived from one kind of relation to a fundamentally different kind.

The crucial point is that ontological dependence is not simply one consideration among many to be weighed against reciprocity, accessibility, or emotional fulfillment. It is the more fundamental reality that makes every other aspect of the relation possible. The creature's existence is itself the relation. Before the creature can seek God, respond to God, love God, reject God, question God, or experience God as hidden, it must first exist. That existence is continuously received.

For this reason, the Creator-creature relation differs from ordinary interpersonal relations in a way that is not merely quantitative but qualitative. Relational expectations such as reciprocity, mutual recognition, and responsiveness arise most naturally between agents who already possess independent existence. To evaluate the relation solely through categories of reciprocity or accessibility is therefore to begin at the wrong level of analysis.

The answer lies in the nature of the relation itself. The appropriate response to one's source of being is not determined by whether that source satisfies creaturely preferences for affection, accessibility, reciprocity, or experiential reassurance. It is determined by the kind of being the creature is: a dependent recipient whose *esse* is received at every moment from Subsistent Being Itself.

In this structure, what appears to be a tension between ontological and relational considerations is actually a category mistake. Reciprocity, recognition, accessibility, and emotional fulfillment cannot serve as the ultimate foundation of the relation because they themselves depend upon a more basic reality already in place.

The issue is therefore not whether an orientation toward God is warranted. The creature never occupies a position outside the relation from which such a determination could be made. The issue is instead which orientation is coherent with the relation that already constitutes the creature's existence. The argument advanced here maintains that love represents the proper orientation of a dependent being toward the source of its being.

2.6 Can Love Be Obligatory Without Being Coerced?

A parallel structure appears in contemporary arguments denying that there can be an obligation to love God. William Bell and Graham Renz contend that love cannot be morally required because coerced love ceases to be genuine love (Bell and Renz 2024, 77–88). Obligations, on their account, correspond to enforceable duties grounded in rights. Since no being possesses a right to be loved, there can be no obligation to love God. Love, therefore, cannot be commanded.

At first glance, this position appears compelling. Genuine love is ordinarily understood as voluntary rather than coerced. If love is authentic only when freely given, then requiring love appears self-defeating. Bell and Renz therefore conclude that obligations to love God are conceptually incoherent.

Yet their argument rests upon the same assumption that underlies many conditional accounts of love. It treats the divine-human relation as structurally analogous to relations among independent, self-subsisting agents. Within such relations, love appears as a voluntary attitude that cannot be externally imposed without undermining its authenticity. The

difficulty is that the Creator-creature relation does not possess this structure.

Ontological dependence is not optional, consensual, contractual, or revocable. It is the constitutive condition of creaturely existence itself. As Aquinas argues, God sustains creatures in being “not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being” (ST I, q. 8, a. 1; I, q. 104, a. 1).

Within such a relation, the obligation to love God cannot be understood primarily as an externally imposed duty grounded in rights. It is instead the proper existential orientation of a being that exists only through another. The obligation arises not from contract, reciprocity, or interpersonal expectation but from the nature of the relation itself. The creature does not possess a right to exist independently of its source of being. Nor does it occupy a standpoint from which dependence may be accepted or rejected. Where dependence persists, the corresponding obligation persists as well.

Bell and Renz's rights-based framework therefore encounters significant difficulties when applied to the Creator-creature relation. It treats love as something that could coherently be absent without affecting the fundamental relation between God and creature. On the present account, however, such absence represents a profound misalignment within the very relation that makes existence possible. The obligation to love God is not coercive in the ordinary sense. It is metaphysical.

Moreover, the claim that required love ceases to be genuine love appears difficult to reconcile with ordinary moral experience. Human beings frequently recognize obligations of love arising from constitutive relations rather than voluntary agreements. Children commonly regard themselves as owing gratitude, honor, loyalty, or love to their parents because of the relation from which they come. Such obligations are not generally experienced as external coercion but as fitting responses to the

nature of the relationship itself. The fact that such love is regarded as owed does not render it inauthentic. On the contrary, the non-voluntary character of the relation is often precisely what gives the corresponding obligation its force.

The analogy is imperfect, since no human relation fully parallels the Creator-creature relation. Nevertheless, it illustrates an important point. Obligation and genuine love are not mutually exclusive categories. The mere fact that love is owed does not entail that it ceases to be love. Bell and Renz therefore do not establish that there can be no obligation to love God. Rather, they demonstrate the inadequacy of analyzing the divine-human relation through categories derived from relations among independent agents.

2.7 Synthesis and Transition

Despite their considerable differences, the theories examined throughout this section share a common underlying structure. Oord grounds love in responsiveness and flourishing. Bruni grounds it in forms of reciprocity. Schellenberg grounds it in accessibility and relationship. Bell and Renz ground it in voluntary attitudes arising among rights-bearing agents. In each case, love is understood through conditions external to the relation itself. Benefit, reciprocity, accessibility, recognition, fulfillment, or favorable outcome function as conditions that justify the continuation of love.

When applied to the relation between creature and Creator, this structure generates predictable consequences. Suffering challenges love by removing benefit. Hiddenness challenges love by removing accessibility. Perceived hostility challenges love by removing reciprocity. Final judgment challenges love by removing favorable outcome. Under a conditional framework, the obligation to love contracts as these conditions disappear and may ultimately vanish altogether.

Once this shift in perspective is recognized, conditional models collapse. They attempt to ground love in factors that are secondary to the very relation they presuppose. Benefit, reciprocity, accessibility, fulfillment, and outcome may influence the creature's experience of its relation to God, but they cannot constitute its ultimate foundation. The foundation lies deeper, in the ontological dependence that makes every aspect of creaturely existence possible.

The argument of this paper therefore rejects conditional accounts of love for God. It maintains instead that the duty to love God is grounded in ontological dependence itself. Because this dependence persists under every condition in which the creature exists, the corresponding obligation persists as well. No degree of suffering, hiddenness, deprivation, disappointment, or even judgment can eliminate the relation from which the obligation arises.

Section 3: Ontological Dependence as the Ground of Obligation

The preceding section demonstrated that conditional models of love for God fail because they tie obligation to factors that can be removed. A non-conditional account therefore requires a different and more fundamental ground. The duty to love God is grounded in ontological dependence. This is not the claim that dependence merely accompanies the relation between creature and Creator. It is the stronger claim that ontological dependence constitutes the relation and determines the obligation that follows from it.

The creature does not exist independently and only then enter into relation with God. It exists solely by being continuously sustained in being by God. Classical theology articulates this truth with precision. Thomas Aquinas holds that God is present to all things as the cause of their being, not only of their origin (*ST I*, q. 8, a. 1). Further, creatures require divine conservation in order to continue in existence (*ST I*, q. 104, a.

1). Being is not possessed independently. It is received and maintained at every moment. "The being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power" (ST I, q. 104, a. 1).

Bernard of Clairvaux connects this dependence with a debt of love: "If I owe all for having been created, what can I add for being remade, and being remade in this way?" (Bernard 1995, 18). He also maintains that the world cannot subsist without its Creator (Bernard 1995, 27). His account thus provides a precedent for linking received existence with the obligation to love God.

Contemporary metaphysical discussions of dependence and participation reinforce this classical framework. Ross Inman argues that all creaturely being is "received being," meaning that finite creatures possess existence only through their derivative relation to God, who serves as the ultimate source and foundation of all non-God reality (Inman 2021, 1). Similarly, Michele Paolini Paoletti argues that genuine dependence relations are asymmetrical: "if something depends upon something else through a given dependence relation, then the latter does not depend on the former through that very relation" (Paolini Paoletti 2024, 1). Creaturely existence is therefore not an autonomous reality that subsequently enters into relation with God. Rather, the creature exists only through an ontological relation of dependence upon its source.

D. C. Schindler likewise argues that participation expresses the ontological dependence of finite realities upon a transcendent source, such that a thing "has its reality ... by virtue of something other than itself" (Schindler 2005, 1). Participation therefore names more than an external causal relation. It signifies a metaphysical structure in which finite being receives its actuality and intelligibility from that in which it participates. The creature's *esse* is continuously received rather than autonomously possessed. This reinforces the central claim

advanced here: the relation between creature and Creator is not contractual, reciprocal, or episodic, but ontologically constitutive. The creature exists only as dependent.

Joshua Compton, drawing on the work of John Zizioulas, argues that creaturely existence is fundamentally participatory and relational rather than self-grounding or autonomous. As he observes, “creaturely truth is dependent truth requiring participation in God” (Compton 2019, 3). Human existence is constituted through dependence, reception, and participation in realities prior to the self. This participatory structure reinforces the claim advanced here that creaturely identity cannot coherently be understood apart from dependence upon the source of being itself. The creature is not first autonomous and later related to God. Dependence belongs to the creature's very mode of existence.

From this metaphysical fact a normative claim follows, though not in an arbitrary or externally imposed way. In classical metaphysics, being and goodness are convertible: to exist is already to participate in the good insofar as a being possesses the actuality proper to its nature. Every being is therefore ordered toward its own proper good and fulfillment. Because God is not merely one being among others but Subsistent Being Itself, the source from which all finite being is continuously derived, the creature's highest good cannot be separated from the source of its existence. The creature exists by continuously receiving its being from God, and this relation is not merely causal but teleological. The proper fulfillment of creaturely existence consists in right orientation toward the source from which that existence is continuously received.

Obligation therefore arises not from an externally imposed command detached from the creature's nature but from the structure of creaturely existence itself. Where dependence is constitutive and inescapable, the orientation corresponding to that dependence is not optional. Love for God is not grounded in benefit, reciprocity, or outcome but in the teleological order

of participation itself. To reject orientation toward God is not merely to violate an imposed rule but to stand in contradiction to the constitutive relation that grounds the creature's being and flourishing.

In classical metaphysics, this transition from being to normativity is not arbitrary. Because God is Subsistent Being Itself and the source of all goodness, the continuous reception of being is already a participation in the Good. The creature's fundamental orientation toward its source is thus not an extrinsic imposition but the proper response to what it is (on the convertibility of being and goodness in Aquinas, see *ST* I, q. 5, a. 1; on participation, see I, q. 44, a. 1).

This account does not derive obligation from benefit, reciprocity, or outcome. It does not ask whether existence is good, whether God is responsive, or whether the future is favorable. Any such evaluation already presupposes the very relation it seeks to assess. The obligation is prior to and independent of these secondary considerations. It follows directly from the fact that the creature exists as dependent.

The biblical tradition reflects this structure. Human life is presented as given rather than possessed: "The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen 2:7). This is not merely an account of origin. It expresses an ongoing condition. The creature lives by what it receives. This dependence persists even under judgment: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). The relation is not revoked. It continues to define the creature's existence.

The theological tradition converges on this point in different forms. Søren Kierkegaard describes faith as persisting "by virtue of the absurd," where all rational justification and calculable assurance fail (Kierkegaard 1983, 56). Nygren characterizes agape as love that "loves, and creates value in its object," unlike eros, which "recognizes value in its object, and

therefore loves it” (Nygren 1982, 165). St. John of the Cross describes the dark night of the spirit in which experiential assurance is withdrawn and “heaven seemed to be closed,” yet the soul’s loving adherence to God endures through naked faith (John of the Cross 1959, II.13 and II.21). These accounts differ in emphasis but converge on a common insight: the relation to God does not depend on the conditions under which it is experienced.

The normative implication is direct. The duty to love God is grounded in ontological dependence. Because the creature exists by receiving its being from God, the orientation that corresponds to that relation is not optional. It does not depend on favorable conditions. It does not vary with the quality of life, the presence or absence of reciprocity, or the prospect of any outcome.

This claim admits no qualification. The duty to love God is not one obligation among others that can be balanced or overridden. It is grounded in the condition that makes all such considerations possible. The creature cannot suspend its dependence in order to evaluate whether the obligation applies. The obligation follows from the fact that the creature is what it is.

Section 4: Normativity Under Limit Conditions

The preceding section established that the duty to love God is grounded in ontological dependence. This section tests that claim under the conditions that appear most likely to negate it. The method is straightforward. Each case deliberately removes one of the conditions on which conditional accounts of love typically depend. If the duty to love God is contingent, it will fail when those conditions are removed. If it is grounded in ontological dependence, it will remain in force even then.

The cases are not arbitrary. They correspond to the three principal ways in which love is ordinarily justified: benefit,

reciprocity, and outcome. A good life provides grounds for gratitude. Mutual recognition provides grounds for relational commitment. A favorable future provides grounds for sustained devotion. Remove these supports, and ordinary accounts of love are expected to collapse.

The argument of this paper denies that structure entirely. None of these grounds is fundamental. The duty to love God does not depend on what the creature receives, on how God is experienced, or on what the future holds. It depends solely on the fact that the creature exists by continuously receiving its being from God. Because this ontological dependence persists under all circumstances, the duty persists as well.

4.1 A Bad Life: The Absence of Benefit

The first case removes benefit. Consider a life marked by persistent suffering, deprivation, or misfortune, in which the goods of existence are either absent or decisively outweighed by its burdens. This is not a temporary affliction but a sustained condition that ordinary evaluative standards would deem not worth living.

Within any framework that ties love to benefit, such a life undermines the obligation to love God. If love is grounded in what is received, then a life experienced as bad removes its justification. Gratitude cannot be sustained where no good is given. Devotion appears unwarranted where existence itself is experienced as a burden.

This reasoning rests on a critical presupposition: that the value of existence determines the appropriateness of love. Love is treated as a response to the goodness of what is given. Where that goodness is absent, the response is rightly withdrawn.

The account developed in this paper rejects that presupposition entirely. The duty to love God is not grounded in the quality of life received but in the fact that life is received. The creature's existence, regardless of its character or hedonic balance,

remains continuously derived from God at every moment. This relation of dependence is not altered by the distribution of goods or evils within that existence.

A life may be judged bad by any number of standards. It may lack justice, fulfillment, pleasure, or relief. It does not cease to be given. The ground of the duty therefore remains intact. Suffering removes one class of justification for love. It does not remove the condition that makes love obligatory.

This point can be stated more precisely. To condition the duty to love God on the goodness of life is to treat existence as if it were self-originating and therefore open to evaluation from an independent standpoint. On such a view, the creature would first assess whether its existence is worthwhile and only then decide whether love is warranted. This structure is incoherent on the present account. The creature does not occupy a position outside the condition of its own existence. It exists only within that condition.

Scripture reflects this structure with striking clarity. The Book of Job systematically removes every conceivable benefit without terminating devotion. Job's losses are total: wealth, family, and health are stripped away (Job 1–2). The narrative offers no tidy theodicy that would restore a benefit-based justification. Instead, it presents a declaration that eliminates benefit as a ground altogether: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). Devotion persists even under the possibility of utter destruction.

The implication is direct. The absence of benefit does not eliminate the duty to love God. It reveals whether that duty was ever grounded in benefit or in something prior to it. If the duty were grounded in benefit, it would fail in this case. Because it does not fail, it must be grounded elsewhere.

4.2 Divine Hostility: The Absence of Reciprocity

The second case removes reciprocity. Consider the possibility that God is experienced not merely as silent but as actively hostile, opposed, or destructive toward the creature. This exceeds ordinary divine hiddenness. It is a condition in which God is perceived as acting directly against the creature's good. The relation appears radically asymmetrical in the strongest possible sense.

Within any framework that grounds love in reciprocity, this condition eliminates the obligation to love God. Love is commonly understood as sustained by mutual recognition or return. Where one party does not love, or where one party acts against the other, the other is released from any duty to continue loving. In human relations, the absence of reciprocity justifies withdrawal. A one-sided relation is taken to lack the conditions that make love appropriate or even possible.

Applied to the divine case, this reasoning yields a straightforward result. If God does not love the creature, or if God is experienced as acting against the creature, then the creature has no obligation to love God. The relation lacks reciprocity and therefore lacks a sufficient ground for love.

The account developed in this paper rejects this conclusion. It denies that reciprocity is determinative of the obligation to love God. The creature's dependence on God is not conditioned by how God is experienced. As long as the creature exists, it continues to receive its being from God at every moment. That relation of ontological dependence persists independently of reciprocity.

This point is structural. Reciprocity concerns the attitudes or actions of the parties involved. Ontological dependence concerns the condition of existence itself. The latter is not altered by the former. The creature does not cease to depend on God when God is experienced as absent, silent, or hostile.

The relation that grounds the duty therefore remains fully in place.

To make the obligation to love God dependent on reciprocity is to treat the divine relation as though it were analogous to relations between independent agents. It assumes that the creature stands in a position from which it can evaluate God's stance and calibrate its own response accordingly. This assumption is incompatible with the present account. The creature does not stand outside the relation it seeks to evaluate. It exists only within it.

The absence of reciprocity therefore removes a relational justification for love. It does not remove the ground of the duty. The creature remains radically dependent on God even under conditions of perceived hostility. The obligation that follows from that dependence remains in force.

This point is reflected in the scriptural material. The Psalms repeatedly articulate situations in which God is experienced as absent or unresponsive: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1). The address to God persists in the absence of any response. The relation is not terminated. It is maintained without reciprocity.

In more extreme formulations, God is described as actively acting against the speaker: "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Psalm 44:24). The very complaint presupposes a relation that is not dissolved by perceived opposition. The absence of reciprocity does not produce withdrawal. It produces intensified address.

This persistence of fidelity amid perceived abandonment also appears in Francis de Sales. He describes the soul's continued adherence to the divine will amid spiritual distress, even when it scarcely perceives its own fidelity (Francis de Sales 1997, 364). His account distinguishes love from its felt reassurance: the absence of consolation need not entail the cessation of love.

The conclusion follows directly. The removal of reciprocity does not eliminate the duty to love God. It reveals whether that duty was ever grounded in reciprocity or in something prior to it. If the duty were grounded in reciprocity, it would fail in this case. Because it does not fail, it must be grounded elsewhere.

4.3 Hell: The Absence of Outcome

The third case removes outcome. Consider hell understood as final and irreversible judgment in which no reconciliation, reward, or restoration is possible. This condition eliminates any appeal to future good. If love is justified by the prospect of fulfillment, then hell removes that justification entirely.

Within an outcome-based framework, the conclusion follows directly. Love is sustained by its end. It is ordered toward union, reward, or completion. Where no such end can be attained, love loses its point. To continue loving under such conditions appears not merely difficult but irrational, since no good can result from it.

The account developed in this paper rejects this framework entirely. The duty to love God is not grounded in what the relation produces but in what the relation is. The creature's dependence on God is not oriented toward a future outcome that could be realized or denied. It is a present, constitutive condition that persists as long as the creature exists.

If the creature exists in hell, it exists by receiving its being from God. This dependence does not cease under conditions of judgment. Hell does not establish independence. It presupposes dependence. The creature remains what it is: a being whose existence is continuously derived from its source at every moment.

Scripture presents hell in precisely these terms. It is final and irreversible: "These will go away into eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46). It is fixed and unalterable: "A great chasm has been fixed" (Luke 16:26). These descriptions eliminate any

expectation of reversal or restoration. They remove outcome as a possible ground for devotion.

At the same time, the creature in hell is not depicted as existing apart from God. Judgment presupposes divine authority. Existence continues under that authority. The relation of ontological dependence is not withdrawn. The creature does not become self-sufficient. It remains radically dependent even in damnation.

This point is decisive. The removal of outcome eliminates every teleological justification for love. It does not eliminate the condition that grounds the obligation. The creature in hell continues to exist only by receiving its being from God. The relation on which the duty to love is grounded therefore persists undiminished.

To make the duty to love God dependent on outcome is to treat love as an instrument directed toward a future good. On this view, love is justified because it leads to fulfillment. Where fulfillment is impossible, love becomes unwarranted. This structure is incompatible with the present account. Love for God is not an instrument. It is the fundamental orientation that corresponds to the relation that constitutes the creature's existence.

The implication follows directly. The duty to love God does not depend on the prospect of salvation, reward, or reconciliation. It remains in force even where these are absent. Hell removes the final class of justification on which conditional accounts rely. It does not remove the ground of the duty itself.

This case is decisive because it removes all remaining grounds for conditional love. If the duty persists here, it persists universally. The creature exists by receiving its being from God. That condition does not cease in hell. The duty that follows from it therefore does not cease.

4.4 Synthesis

The three cases converge on a single result. The absence of benefit, the absence of reciprocity, and the absence of outcome each eliminate a distinct basis on which conditional accounts of love for God depend. In every instance, ordinary justifications for love collapse. What remains undiminished, however, is the relation of ontological dependence.

In the first case, a life marked by unrelieved suffering removes any appeal to benefit or fairness. The creature receives no goods that would justify gratitude or devotion. Yet the creature continues to exist only by receiving its being from God. The removal of benefit does not alter that constitutive condition.

In the second case, the experience of divine hostility removes reciprocity. The creature perceives no divine favor or response. The relation appears radically one-sided. Yet the creature continues to exist only by receiving its being from God. The absence of reciprocity does not terminate that relation.

In the third case, hell removes outcome. No reconciliation, reward, or restoration is possible. The future offers no good that could justify devotion. Yet the creature continues to exist only by receiving its being from God. The absence of outcome does not eliminate that dependence.

These cases differ in content but share an identical structure. Each removes one of the conditions on which conditional accounts rely. None removes the relation of ontological dependence that grounds the obligation. The persistence of that relation across all three limiting cases demonstrates that it is not contingent. It is constitutive.

4.5 Irrevocability of the Duty

The conclusion follows directly from this convergence. The duty to love God is not conditional. It is irrevocable. It does not arise

from benefit, reciprocity, or outcome. It is grounded solely in ontological dependence.

Because the creature exists only by continuously receiving its being from God, the relation that grounds the duty persists under every condition in which the creature exists. There is no circumstance in which the creature can continue to exist while being released from this dependence. There is therefore no circumstance in which the duty that follows from it ceases.

This claim admits no exception. Not suffering. Not the absence of reciprocity. Not hell. Each of these removes a secondary ground on which conditional accounts rely. None removes the ground identified in this paper.

To deny the duty to love God under these conditions is to presuppose that the obligation depends on factors external to the relation of ontological dependence. The preceding analysis shows that this presupposition is false. The duty does not depend on what the creature receives, on how God is experienced, or on what the future holds. It depends only on the fact that the creature exists by receiving its being from God.

The implication is not limited to extreme cases. It applies universally. Wherever the creature exists, the relation of dependence is present. Wherever that relation is present, the duty to love God is in force. The variability of external conditions does not affect the ground of the obligation.

The duty to love God is therefore unconditional and non-derivative. It is not one obligation among others that may be balanced or overridden. It is grounded in the condition that makes all such considerations possible. It does not vary with circumstance because the relation on which it depends does not vary.

The analysis of limit conditions does not weaken this claim. It confirms it. By stripping away the conditions on which conditional accounts depend, these cases reveal the ground of

the duty in its purest form. Love for God does not persist because conditions are favorable. It persists because the relation between creature and Creator persists.

Section 5: Conclusion

The argument of this paper has been direct. It has rejected the widespread assumption that love for God is conditional and has established that the duty to love God is grounded in ontological dependence. This conclusion has not been reached by appeal to benefit, reciprocity, or outcome. It has been reached by identifying the relation that constitutes the creature's existence and determining the obligation that necessarily follows from it.

The critique of conditional models showed that they tie love to factors that can be removed. Where benefit is absent, where reciprocity fails, or where outcome is foreclosed, the obligation collapses. This instability is not incidental. It is the inevitable consequence of grounding love in conditions that are inherently contingent. Once those conditions are removed, nothing remains to sustain the obligation.

The alternative developed in this paper locates the ground of the duty in a relation that cannot be removed. The creature exists only by continuously receiving its being from God. This dependence is not episodic. It is continuous and constitutive. It is not established under favorable conditions. It persists under every condition in which the creature exists. As Thomas Aquinas teaches, God is present to all things as the cause of their being and sustains them in existence at every moment (*ST* I, q. 8, a. 1; I, q. 104, a. 1). The relation between creature and Creator is therefore not accidental but essential.

From this relation a normative claim follows. The duty to love God is not contingent. It is not derived from what the creature receives, from how God is experienced, or from what the future holds. It follows directly from the fact that the creature exists

by receiving its being from God. Because this condition persists, the duty persists.

The examination of limit conditions confirms this conclusion. A life marked by unrelieved suffering removes benefit. The experience of divine hostility removes reciprocity. The condition of hell removes outcome. In each case, the grounds on which conditional accounts rely are eliminated. In each case, the relation of ontological dependence remains intact. The persistence of the duty across these extreme conditions demonstrates that it is not grounded in any of them.

Scripture and the theological tradition attest to this structure. The Book of Job presents devotion that persists without benefit (Job 13:15). The Psalms present a relation that persists without reciprocity (Psalm 22:1; 44:24). The teaching on final judgment presents a condition in which outcome is removed (Matthew 25:46; Luke 16:26). The theological accounts of Søren Kierkegaard, Anders Nygren, and St. John of the Cross each articulate forms of relation that do not depend on justification, acquisition, or experience. These sources do not generate the argument. They confirm its form.

The conclusion can be stated without qualification. The duty to love God is unconditional and irrevocable. It does not admit of suspension under adverse conditions. It does not vary with circumstance. There is no condition in which the creature exists and is thereby released from this obligation.

Love for God is therefore not contingent, not reciprocal, and not optional. It is required by the condition of creaturely existence itself.

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