

**Mark Murphy. *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency & the Argument from Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. x+210 pp. \$70.00 (hbk).**

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For some time now, it has been striking how little scholarship has been produced at the intersection of philosophy of religion and contemporary ethics (including meta-ethics, ethical theory, and moral psychology). While the field of philosophy of religion has benefited for decades from fruitful applications of work in metaphysics and epistemology, the same cannot be said for ethics.

Mark Murphy's new book is a notable exception. Drawing extensively on important recent work on reasons, moral rationalism, and other related topics, Murphy outlines a bold and original position on God's ethics, or more precisely on God's dispositions when it comes to treating different considerations as reasons (2). This account is highly interesting in its own right, but it also has a major payoff by providing a novel response to the problem of evil. The result is a book which is essential reading for anyone working in philosophy of religion (and not just on the problem of evil). Indeed, it has many arguments which would be of interest to philosophers in mainstream analytic ethics, even if they happen to have little interest in God's ethics.

Murphy begins by noting that he will be focusing on an Anselmian conception of God as absolutely perfect, where this is distinct from the greatest possible being, the supreme object of worship, and the supreme object of allegiance. About such an Anselmian being, Murphy defends two controversial assumptions:

*The Distributive Assumption:* "God exhibits the maximal level of the divine perfections, understood distributively – for *each* unqualified good-making property that God exhibits, God exhibits *that property* to the intrinsic maximum of its value" (12, emphasis his).

*The Absolute Greatness Assumption:* The "metaphysical limit of the good-making properties permits a being who exhibits those properties to that limit to be sufficiently great, absolutely speaking" (17).

Although Murphy's goal is not to develop a detailed version of Anselmianism, he does argue at some length that these traditional assumptions are plausible.

In what is likely going to be the most controversial and most widely discussed section of the book, Murphy next turns to the question of whether the Anselmian being is loving. His claim is that if the Anselmian being is loving, that is captured completely by that being's perfect moral goodness. There is nothing more left over. 'Moral goodness' is understood here

as “fittingly responsive to values of the sorts that are at stake in morality” (23), and the sort of moral goodness that Murphy focuses on is what he calls ‘familiar welfare-oriented’ goodness (24). A being who is morally good in this way, then, will aim to prevent losses of well-being for rational beings, unless there are reasonable grounds for allowing those losses (such as a greater good they will bring about) (25). From here, Murphy claims that “For *being loving* both to be a divine perfection and to motivate in a way that moral goodness does not, then, it must be the case that it is a divine perfection to be motivated in particular ways toward some value – say, that of created persons – in a manner that goes beyond that rationally necessitated by that value” (29, emphasis his). Murphy discusses two possibilities of how this might happen, and finds them implausible.

So if the Anselmian being is loving, then that is captured by its moral goodness. But it does not follow that this being is morally good. Indeed, in chapter three, Murphy offers reasons to doubt the claim. In particular, he raises doubts about whether the well-being of humans gives the Anselmian being reason to act. On top of this, he argues that even if such reasons are generated, they need to be both reasons to *promote* human well-being, and they need to be *requiring* as opposed to merely justifying reasons. But doubts can be raised about both of these claims as well.

Chapters four and five give us a more positive account of the ethics of the Anselmian being. In particular, the Anselmian being has justifying reasons to promote the existence, well-being, and perfection of human beings. At the same time, such a being has requiring reasons against intending evil as a means or as an end. Along the way in these chapters we find fascinating discussions of whether humans have intrinsic value (they do not), and whether the intended/foreseen distinction is defensible and applies to the Anselmian being (it does).

Chapter six delivers a huge payoff of the preceding discussion. There Murphy argues that the problem of evil – in both its logical and evidential versions – does not tell against the existence of the Anselmian being. Here is the main reason why:

...the reasons that the Anselmian being has to promote the nonexistence of creaturely evils are not requiring reasons, but only justifying reasons. Since one can exhibit perfect rationality with respect to some justifying reason without acting on it, even in the absence of reasons to the contrary, the fact that there are evils that God has justifying reasons to prevent but does not prevent does not count in any way against God's being absolutely perfect (105).

Murphy also argues that his response to the problem(s) of evil is superior to the well-known skeptical theism defenses.

Chapter seven turns to two notions that are frequently associated with the perfection of the Anselmian being, namely worship-worthiness and allegiance-worthiness. It turns out on Murphy's view that worship-worthiness is entailed by perfection, but allegiance-worthiness is not. Murphy considers two kinds of allegiance – alliance and obedience – but his basic worry applies to both of them. According to Murphy, for a person to be worthy of another's allegiance, “ends, goals, etc. must be shared by the parties in question. But...ends, goals, etc. are not necessarily shared by the Anselmian being and created rational beings. So the Anselmian being is not necessarily worthy of the allegiance of created rational beings” (135).

The Anselmian being is contingently worthy of allegiance. And according to orthodox theism, God is worthy of allegiance in *this* world. So Murphy has to explain what makes the Anselmian being worthy in this way, which is the project of chapter eight. His focus centers on the good of religion, and the main move he makes is to argue that if the good of religion is available and reasonably pursuable by us, then “we have decisive reason to have allegiance to the Anselmian being; and that good is available to us if the Anselmian being can, contingently, exhibit a certain sort of ethics with respect to us” (148). ‘Religion’ as used here roughly involves being properly related to or in harmony with the divine.

Finally, in chapter nine Murphy ends by taking up two additional formulations of the problem of evil, as well as the criticism that his project in the book has been at best a ‘rearguard’ action or delaying maneuver. The first formulation notes that the contingent ethics the Anselmian being has in this world (in order to be allegiance-worthy) is such that the being will have requiring reasons to prevent every evil. That would be enough, then, to revitalize the problem of evil. The second formulation looks to the details of Abrahamic theism in particular, and claims that the ethics we find via revelation is one according to which God has requiring reasons (at least in this world) to prevent every evil. Murphy offers interesting and important responses to both of these formulations.

Murphy’s writing is philosophically rigorous and careful. The book is packed full of arguments. It is not a book merely adding one small move to the enormous literature on the problem of evil or God and morality. Rather each chapter contains original work that deserves to be discussed in the secondary literature at great length.

The book can also be a challenging read in some places. I found myself struggling at times with sentences like this one:

If God might have a maximal love, without that maximal love’s being manifested in anything like motivation toward the maximal good of and unity with creatures, then we could protect the compatibility of the affirmation of God’s being perfectly loving in the supreme degree sense with the denial of there being an intrinsic maximum of the motivation toward the good of, and unity with, creatures (41-42).

So here’s my hope – that Murphy will be inspired to write a trade or non-academic version of this book for a religious (or even secular) audience. My fear is that the degree of difficulty of the material may discourage readers who don’t have an advanced degree in philosophy. And that would be a real shame, as Murphy’s central ideas should be of great interest and benefit to people who wrestle with the problem of evil or even just want to think more about God and morality. So I very much hope that he, or someone else who is sympathetic with his view, will take this project on.

More substantively, I found myself in agreement with many of Murphy’s arguments. So instead of criticism, let me end with two topics which I wish Murphy had explored in greater detail. The first is the Anselmian being’s *character*. As noted, Murphy operates with an understanding of moral goodness as appropriate responsiveness to familiar welfare-oriented considerations, and then argues that moral goodness so understood is not a feature of the Anselmian being’s nature. Since there is nothing to being loving that is not captured by moral goodness, then the Anselmian being is also not essentially loving.

But what about the moral virtues of the Anselmian being? Suppose that virtues are excellences which are (plausibly) part of the character of a perfect being. It seems as if they

would not be optional or contingent features of that being. But then they might serve as a basis for revitalizing the problem of evil. Claims like “the Anselmian being might, without error, be *totally indifferent* to us” (168, emphasis in original) might seem less plausible when talking about a being whose character is perfectly compassionate and perfectly just. My point here is not to support such a formulation of the problem of evil, but rather to suggest one topic for further exploration.

The second topic is *parenthood*. Here I suspect some readers may have wanted Murphy to take up the frequently used analogy between God and his human children on the one hand, and human parents and their children on the other. Suppose Murphy is right that merely creating human beings does not bring with it requiring reasons for promoting their well-being. But if the Anselmian being is not just a creator but also a parent (indeed, a perfect parent) to those human beings, then that might change things. For in the human case, it is not at all clear that a good parent does not have requiring reasons to promote the well-being of her child, say when the child is seriously injured or is in danger of wandering away and getting lost. For a good human parent, both moral goodness and being loving do not seem optional, at least with respect to the parent’s own child. So too for the Anselmian being, I suspect some critics might hold. If such a being is not just our creator but also our perfect parent, then Murphy’s claims like “God loves us, though God did not have to” (195, emphasis removed) might seem less plausible. Again, I am not endorsing this line of reasoning, but only noting it in the hope that Murphy will expand his discussion in both of the above directions in future work.

Mark Murphy’s latest book is one of his best. As anyone who has read his previous books will know, this is very high praise indeed.