

Mark C. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 224 pages. ISBN: 9780198796916. Hardback: \$70.00.

In this carefully argued and thought-provoking book, Mark Murphy defends a novel response to the problem of reconciling the existence of a perfect God with the evils we find in the world. This response denies that, other things equal, God would be motivated to eliminate the kinds of evils we observe. For while we – rightly – take others' well-being and suffering to provide *us* with requiring reasons to promote that well-being and prevent that suffering, these same reasons do not extend to God.

Murphy defends this response by explicating God's ethics – that is, the dispositions God has to treat various facts as reasons for action. Part I of the book (chapters 1–6) explores God's ethics inasmuch as God is a perfect being – a being possessing, to a maximal degree, all properties that make one unqualifiedly greater. Murphy calls God so understood “the Anselmian being.”

The Anselmian being is perfectly rational, and so must be morally good in the formal sense of rationally responding to value. And the perfection of the Anselmian being's agency implies that the Anselmian being can never *intend* – either as an end or as a means – that evil befall creatures. But Murphy denies that the Anselmian being is rationally required to *prevent* creaturely evils, or promote creaturely goods. Canonical (Hobbesian, Humean, Aristotelian, and Kantian) explanations for why we are rationally required to promote our fellow humans' welfare appeal to features (such as human psychology or human nature) we do not share with the Anselmian being. One might respond that we have intrinsic value, and all agents are rationally required to promote intrinsic value. But, Murphy argues, the Anselmian being's sovereignty consists partly in being the only being with intrinsic value. Other beings' value comes only from participation in the Anselmian being's value. Consequently, while creating us and promoting our welfare brings about more *good things*, it does not bring about more *goodness*.

Nevertheless, the Anselmian being does have *justifying* reasons to promote our welfare. (Requiring reasons rationally require action, unless counterbalanced by equally weighty reasons; justifying reasons justify but do not require action.) The fact that creating and perfecting us to some degree would be good *for us* is a reason for the Anselmian being to do so – but because this situation is not better overall from some agent-neutral point of view, this reason is merely justifying, and not requiring.

Since the Anselmian being has only justifying and not requiring reasons to promote our welfare, there is no reason to expect that being to prevent the

evils we observe. As such, there is no good argument from evil against the existence of such a being.

One might reasonably worry, though, that a being completely indifferent to our welfare is not one whom we would owe worship and allegiance. Part II (chapters 7–9) turns to this challenge. Murphy argues that the Anselmian being is necessarily worthy of our worship, but not necessarily worthy of our allegiance. However, the Anselmian being can become worthy of our allegiance – and so become our *God* – by imposing constraints on the Anselmian being's own willing, and so adopting a contingent ethics. These ethics need not be exactly the same as ours. But they do need to be sufficiently oriented towards our good that we can reasonably ally ourselves with and subordinate ourselves to the Anselmian being.

On Murphy's preferred model of God's contingent ethics, it is part of God's will that we act "in accordance with the norms of practical reasonableness that apply to us and ... that, should we subordinate our wills to the divine will for our action, then all will be well for us" (p. 188). On this model, it makes sense for us to obey and ally ourselves with God, for in so doing we will not be violating any practical norms, and we can be assured that we will ultimately be better off. Moreover, this model fits with the Biblical depiction of God as making covenants with humanity. But this model of God's will does not entail that God will be motivated to prevent the earthly evils that befall us, for an earthly life free of evils is only one of multiple ways our lives might ultimately go well for us. So these evils are no barrier to our holding that the Anselmian being is worthy of our allegiance, or that the Anselmian being is the God revealed in the Bible.

While Murphy's focus is on atheistic arguments from evil, his book is filled with careful analyses that will be useful to philosophers working on a broad range of topics, including the nature of God, the relation of God and morality, the good of religion, the analysis of reasons, and the doctrine of double effect. For example, in section 6.5, Murphy considers whether the claim that God cannot intend evil is in tension with the evils we observe. Suppose we think (perhaps because of revelation) that if God exists, God intends the existence of rational animals. This end has come about as the result of evolution by natural selection, a process that essentially involves creaturely evils (such as premature deaths). So, one might think, God must have intended those evil means.

Murphy responds by distinguishing between "making use" of a foreseen evil and intending that evil as a means. Suppose I drink caffeine to help me finish a job application due at midnight, foreseeing that this will make me unable to sleep tonight. I do not intend to stay up all night (I would prefer that the caffeine not have this effect), but foreseeing that I will, I intend to make the

most of it and watch the World Cup final live at 3:00 am. Similarly, God might choose to bring about some good G_1 , foreseeing that this will result in some unintended evil E ; and subsequently make use of E in bringing about an additional good G_2 . That God uses evils to bring about the existence of rational creatures then does not entail that God intends those evils; they might instead be the foreseen but unintended result of some earlier independent good that God aimed at.

I found this depiction of divine choice a helpful corrective to the “world-actualization” model more common in the philosophy of religion, which imagines God surveying entire possible worlds, and choosing one to make actual. The world-actualization model obscures any distinction between intending and foreseeing, and invites a consequentialist model of God’s ethics, on which the primary ethical choice facing God is how much total goodness to actualize. Murphy’s model of logically ordered local intentions is superior in these respects; and it could fruitfully be applied to other problems in the philosophy of religion, such as the relationship between divine providence and human free actions.

One point in Murphy’s argument moves a bit quickly. In section 6.3, Murphy considers Paul Draper’s evidential argument from evil, according to which the pains and pleasures we observe are less probable given theism than given the rival hypothesis that our nature and condition are not caused by any benevolent or malevolent agency. Murphy responds that because the Anselmian being has justifying but not requiring reasons to promote creaturely welfare, “the features of the created world are a matter of divine discretion,” so that the Anselmian being is not disposed to create in any particular way (p. 109). Consequently, there is *no* probability that the Anselmian being would create in this way, as opposed to some other rationally permissible way.

It was not clear to me why the existence of divine discretion in choosing between different options implies that the probability of choosing one option rather than another is indeterminate or non-existent. First, the lack of requiring reasons to φ rather than ψ does not seem to imply the lack of a disposition to φ rather than ψ . It’s natural to think that (for rational agents) justifying reasons, while not *necessitating*, are nevertheless *motivating*, in that they incline the agent somewhat towards the action they justify. And second, even if God is equally disposed towards all rationally available actions, shouldn’t this make all these actions *equally* probable? Further analysis of the relation between reasons, dispositions, and probabilities would be helpful here.

An argument as ambitious as Murphy’s will inevitably have some debatable steps. But on the whole, Murphy is impressively thorough. He not only argues for the truth of his various theses, but provides a general framework for

thinking about God, reasons, goodness, and agency that explains why these theses must be true. The result is that even if you disagree with Murphy's account of God's ethics, this disagreement is unlikely to turn simply on a different intuition about a case or a quibble about a counterexample. Instead, you will find yourself having to defend substantive and controversial rival claims about God, reasons, goodness, and agency. God willing, Murphy's book will encourage further careful work on these important topics.

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