

## **DIVINE RATIONALITY, DIVINE MORALITY, AND DIVINE LOVE: A RESPONSE TO JORDAN**

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In *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*,<sup>1</sup> I argue that an 'Anselmian' (that is, absolutely perfect) being's ethics — that is, "that agent's dispositions to treat various considerations as reasons, and as reasons of certain types" (*GOE*, 1)— is neither an ethics of maximal love (Chap. 2) nor an ethics of perfect moral goodness (Chap. 3), but is much more minimal than that: while an Anselmian being never intends evils (Chap. 5), an Anselmian being may, but need not, promote creaturely well-being (Chap. 4). An Anselmian being can rationally promote the existence and welfare of creatures, but does not have to, and needs no reason not to. I also argue that, while the distance between the ethics that belongs to an Anselmian being as such and the norms of conduct that bind us humans is sufficiently great that there is no necessity that rational creatures will be under a requirement of allegiance toward such a being (Chap. 7), an Anselmian being can take on a contingent ethics with respect to rational creatures that underwrites a requirement of allegiance toward that being (Chap. 8). I further claim that no successful argument from evil can be generated either from the ethics that belongs to an Anselmian being as such (Chap. 6) or from the contingent self-imposed divine ethics that establishes the requirements of allegiance that we are under with respect to the Anselmian being (Chap. 9).

Jeff Jordan criticizes both the account that I offer of the ethics of the Anselmian being as such and the account that I offer of the sort of self-imposed contingent ethics that would underwrite our requirements of allegiance to the divine being.<sup>2</sup> I will respond to both of these lines of criticism. While I think that the concerns that Jordan raises about the ethics of the Anselmian being as such fail to engage with the book's argument, he raises interesting questions about divine ethics and our allegiance to God that need further reflection and discussion.

The central criticism that Jordan raises against the argument of the first part of *God's Own Ethics* is that even if I am successful in undermining the views that God is subject to norms of welfare-oriented moral goodness and that God is motivated in accordance with maximal love for sentient creatures, I have done nothing to make trouble for the view that God would nevertheless be acting *irrationally* by failing to promote the well-being of creatures, at least in the absence of considerations to the contrary. Thus the argument from evil remains in its full force, for all that the argument from evil requires is that an Anselmian being will be necessarily motivated to prevent evils; it does not particularly matter what the source of that motivation is. Here is Jordan:

The prongs of the argument from evil are not just two-fold (perfect goodness and perfect love) but three-fold: perfect rationality along with perfect goodness and perfect love. Even if Murphy has blunted the argument from evil as regards perfect goodness and love, the atheologian is not without recourse as she can weaponize the claim that God is perfectly rational. If a world with pointless evil is worse than one relevantly similar but without, and if God must optimize, then the embers of the argument from evil are

1 Mark C. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Hereafter cited in my text as *GOE*.

2 Jeff Jordan, "The Divine Ethic and the Argument from Evil," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, 4 (2018), 192–203. Page numbers in parenthesis in my text are citations to Jordan's review.

apt to flare up again. Perfect rationality provides a base upon which the superstructure of the argument from evil can be erected, independent of any appeal to moral goodness or love (200).

Jordan's position is that the presence of a pointless evil — something that makes the life of a creature worse, without that loss of welfare's being necessary for some adequately valuable end — makes a state of affairs worse than it would be without that evil. God's perfect rationality precludes God, in the absence of considerations to the contrary, from actualizing a worse state of affairs than some other state of affairs that God might actualize (195). So, in the absence of considerations to the contrary, God does not actualize states of affairs containing pointless evils.

What is the conception of perfect rationality that ensures that God's perfect rationality precludes God's actualizing a worse state of affairs than some other state of affairs that God might actualize, at least in the absence of considerations to the contrary? It is not a formal conception of practical rationality on which rational agents much have coherent preferences, must take effective means to their ends, and so forth. Such a formal conception would not ensure that any two states of affairs were ranked in some particular way in the eyes of a fully practically rational agent. Rather, the conception of perfect rationality is substantive: the perfectly rational agent "knows, at a minimum, which ends are worth pursuing" (197), and, I assume, is also motivated in accordance with that knowledge. So if one knows that one state of affairs is worse than another, then one will know that it is (so far as that goes) less worth pursuing, and will not actualize the worse rather than the better unless there are adequate grounds to.

I find Jordan's line of criticism surprising — not because the question of God's practical rationality is not as important as Jordan says it is, but because *God's Own Ethics* treats it as so important. It is thus entirely obscure to me why Jordan thinks it is ignored in the book. Far from being something that *God's Own Ethics* ignores, the Anselmian being's practical rationality is the focus of its argument. The book's argument that God is not morally bound to promote the well-being of creatures, even *pro tanto*, takes as a lemma that God lacks requiring reasons to promote the well-being of creatures — where a requiring reason just is a reason that a fully practically rationally agent must act on, in the absence of considerations to the contrary (*GOE*, 59).<sup>3</sup> Issues about what God's practical rationality requires are front and center, not ignored. (Indeed, one of my main worries about my argument is that it relies on an overly strong connection between morality and practical rationality, a worry that I work to dispel in 3.6 of *GOE*.)

One way to see that the issues that Jordan raises here are directly addressed in the book is to note that the central argument against the view that the Anselmian being's ethics must be our own applies immediately to the argument of Jordan's that I've reconstructed above. My basic argument against the easy assumption that the Anselmian being's ethics is our ethics is that the standard accounts of why others' good provides an agent reasons for action do not apply to an Anselmian being, and the correctness of any of them would suggest that the Anselmian being does not have requiring reasons to promote and protect creaturely welfare. Hobbesian accounts based on mutual vulnerability and the need for cooperation, Humean accounts based on a contingent attitude that draws us to sympathy with others, Aristotelian accounts based on the norms of concern set by our distinctive kind, Kantian accounts based on our status as "one person among others, equally real"<sup>4</sup> — none of these give the least reason to think that the Anselmian being would have the requiring reasons to look to the good of creatures that we humans have (*GOE*, 48-58). And it is not at all strange that the Anselmian being would not share such reasons with us. *Being a reason* is a three-place relation — not only between a fact and an action, but among a fact, an action, and *an agent*.<sup>5</sup> It is thus entirely unsurprising that the same facts — for example, that some action would promote some creature's well-being, or prevent some harm from befalling some creature — would count as reasons for agents of one sort but not count as reasons for agents of a radically different sort.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between requiring and justifying reasons is due to Joshua Gert; see his *Brute Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19-39.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 88.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Schroeder, "Reasons and Agent-Neutrality," *Explaining the Reasons We Share: Explanation and Expression in Ethics, Volume I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42-59.

If these considerations are relevant, then they of course apply straightforwardly to Jordan's argument as reconstructed above. Jordan proposes that it is plain that the suffering of a creature makes a state of affairs worse and thus God would be practically irrational not to actualize some other state of affairs, one that does not include that suffering, if God does not have some reason to actualize the state of affairs that includes that suffering. But quite obviously I would run through the same arguments described above, and they would have the same force, whatever that force would be. Jordan does not tell us what conception of goodness and betterness he is employing when he calls a state of affairs better just because and insofar as it lacks some instance of unnecessary creaturely suffering. All we know is that there is a tie between goodness of states of affairs and practical rationality: better states of affairs are preferred by practically rational agents. But if we ask why it is that a practically rational agents must prefer, *ceteris paribus*, states of affairs that lack such instances of creaturely suffering, here are the answers we have on offer: Hobbesian strategies, on which having the disposition to promote others' well-being is partly constitutive of being a good cooperater with others, and being such a cooperater is the most rational strategy for achieving one's own ends; Humean strategies, on which we are built to be naturally sympathetic to the suffering of others, and as what is good is fixed by our own attitudes, such states of affairs will present themselves to us as good; Aristotelian strategies, on which rational preference is fixed by the perfection of our dispositions of thought and desire, and on which those agents who have achieved such perfection prefer to prevent suffering of others unless there is some good reason not to; and Kantian strategies, on which we must disvalue our own pain and suffering, and constraints on coherent valuing require us to value others' pain and suffering in the way that we value our own. My aim is not to present complete versions of these arguments again here in response to Jordan; the full arguments are in the book. My point is that Jordan does not articulate anything in his review essay that counts as avoiding a dilemma set by the book; his response is a failure to engage the book's argument rather than the formulation of an alternative strategy that the book does not address.

Instead of appealing to the nonstarter criticism that considerations of divine practical rationality have been ignored, Jordan could appeal directly to the content of my view of divine practical rationality, offering arguments against my position that the Anselmian being is indeed not rationally required to treat creaturely suffering as a consideration that disfavors action. I am happy to translate this into Jordan's language of a possible world's "standing among possible worlds": in the Anselmian being's assessment of the standings of various possible worlds in deciding which to actualize, I claim, that some worlds contain pointless evil may be something that makes no difference to their standing. Jordan finds this unbelievable.

Does pointless evil make a difference to a world's standing among possible worlds? It seems as clear as anything that the amount, if any, of pointless evil affects a world's standing. One might be tempted to think if creaturely suffering is not itself intrinsically bad then allowing pointless evil makes no difference. One should resist that temptation as denying the evil of suffering and pain, while it seems to undercut the intuition driving the problem of evil, does so by placing itself beyond the limits of plausibility. The suffering of a person certainly matters to that person and, appropriately, to those who care about him (198).

Well, if it is "as clear as anything that the amount, if any, of pointless evil affects a world's standing," then the Anselmian being will know and act on that normative truth. But whether and how evils in a world must affect its standing for any practically rational agent is one of the perennial questions of practical philosophy, not some obvious matter that is a premise for any argument against my account of divine ethics. I say that it is not true that the amount of pointless evil must affect the world's standing in the assessment of the Anselmian being. Such suffering is not intrinsically bad — it is, rather, bad because of the way that it affects those who are suffering, and one has reason to care about that suffering, then, only insofar as one has reason to care about the beings who are suffering. But on my account the Anselmian being may, without any practical error, fail to care about any particular creatures. Contrary to what Jordan seems to be suggesting here, none of the arguments that I offer involves or entails the denial that "The suffering of a person certainly matters to that person and, appropriately, to those who care about him." Indeed, my arguments do not involve or entail the denial that each and every human being should care about each and every human

being's suffering. I affirm that each and every human being should care about each and every human being's suffering. I aim to leave our understanding of *our* ethics — the ethics that governs human beings — *exactly as it is*, and Jordan gives no reason at all to think that anything that I have said about the reasons relevant to the action of the radically different Anselmian being unsettles that understanding in the slightest.

The divergence between the ethics of the Anselmian being and our ethics sets a problem that I try to solve in the second part of the book. The problem is this: even if it is true that God's having and acting on a different set of reasons from ours does not in any way call into question God's absolute perfection, does it not call into question God's worship-worthiness and allegiance-worthiness? As God is commonsensically taken to be a being who is not only perfect, but also worthy of the highest worship and allegiance, how can the ascription of a distinctive divine ethics be an acceptable view if such undermines God's worthiness of our worship and allegiance?

I reject the view that God's having a distinctive ethics would make trouble for God's being supremely worthy of worship. Worship involves a set of beliefs, attitudes, and actions that express the superior value of the being worshipped over the worshipper (*GOE*, 130), and God's absolute perfection would entail supreme worship-worthiness, even if we could not be confident that such a God is, so to speak, on our side (*GOE*, 132). But allegiance-worthiness — worthiness of our alliance and obedience — is a different matter. As the most plausible accounts of worthiness for alliance and obedience make it depend on the sharing of ends between the beings who owe allegiance and the beings to whom allegiance is owed, and the argument of the first Part of the book rejects the view that such ends are necessarily shared between us and the Anselmian being, I accept, tentatively, the implication that the allegiance-worthiness of the Anselmian being is no more than contingent. As allegiance-worthiness is not itself a divine perfection, this does not strike me as an unacceptable result (*GOE*, 145–146).

What I suggest is that the Anselmian being can take on a *contingent* ethics — that is, the Anselmian being can act so that it is under further norms of action that are self-imposed — and that there are particular contingent ethics that the Anselmian being could take on such that we would be under requirements of allegiance and obedience. We have an interest in being in a relationship of unity with the Anselmian being — this is the good of 'religion' (*GOE*, 148–156) — and can reasonably do so by subordinating our wills to the Anselmian being's if certain conditions are met (*GOE*, 161–168). On the view I suggest, one can reasonably subordinate one's will to the Anselmian being's if by subordinating our wills to the Anselmian being's we will not be directed to act contrary to what the norms of practical reasonableness forbid and we would succeed better with respect to acting for the sake of the goods relevant to practically reasonable choice if we subordinate our wills to the divine will rather than by using some other proximate standard (*GOE*, 163–165).<sup>6</sup> Any contingent ethics that the Anselmian being takes on that is sufficient to entail that these conditions are met will be sufficient to make the Anselmian being worthy of our full allegiance.

Jordan raises an interesting question for this account of allegiance-worthiness. He notes that one might face a choice whether to subordinate one's will to the Anselmian being, that the conditions that I have outlined definitely obtain, yet in which even if one subordinates one's will to the divine will, one's life (and, we can add, the lives of those whom one reasonably can or must care about) will not be even worth living. Subordinating oneself to the divine will may involve a predictable *improvement* in the quality of all relevant parties' lives, but nevertheless would leave them without lives that pass the threshold to be worth living.<sup>7</sup> Could allegiance to the Anselmian being be required in such a case?

I think that even in this sort of case it would not be reasonable to refrain from subordinating one's will to the divine will. If one would not be called upon to act contrary to the moral law, and if one's being

<sup>6</sup> The conditions I propose are modeled on Raz's "normal justification thesis" with respect to authority, though departing from it in relevant ways due to the specific character of the beings involved. See Raz, "Authority, Law, and Morality," *Ethics in the Public Domain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 198.

<sup>7</sup> I do not believe that a life that realizes the good of religion as characterized in Chapter 8 of *GOE* could be a life not worth living. But I put that objection to the side here.

willing to be directed by the Anselmian being would better realize the goods that are relevant to one's deliberation and action, then it is unclear what the basis for refraining from submitting oneself to the divine will would be. Consider a comparison case. If one finds oneself in a very dire position in ordinary political life due to natural disasters, where one's life on the whole (and the lives of those whom one should care about) will not be good overall, that does not seem to call into question the possibility that subordinating oneself to a would-be authority might be required — if by doing so one is better able to realize the goods that have a claim on one's attention and effort. While the Anselmian being could have, it may be granted, made one's life and those of one's circle better, the Anselmian being is making no mistake in failing to do so. Just as there is no complaint that one can lodge against an unfortunate natural world that shows that it has made a mistake in not conforming to humans' interests, there is no complaint that one can lodge against the Anselmian being that shows that the Anselmian being has made a mistake by failing to provide even enough for one to have a life worth living.<sup>8</sup>

But Jordan has a more pressing point to make, which is that a being who meets these conditions for allegiance may nevertheless not count as loving. I agree with Jordan that it would be a mistake to slide from an account of what makes allegiance to the Anselmian being required to an account of what makes the Anselmian being loving. I don't *think* that I make this slide in the book; I would reject the view that the conditions under which we must have allegiance to the Anselmian being need be sufficient to make the Anselmian being count as loving us. For a loving God must count as benevolent, and unless it is available to one to have a life worth living, then God has not benefited one by bringing one into existence, conserving one's existence, and providentially ordering that existence, and if the other party does not have a benefitting will toward one, then that other does not love one.

I *do* commit myself to the claim that God's promising every person that anyone who subordinates their will to the divine will will have a life worth living on the whole is sufficient both for us to give God our allegiance and for God to count as loving. Jordan finds that view objectionable, though I think he mischaracterizes my position in some ways. Here is Jordan:

Consider again Murphy's ideas about God's love. God need not love any human, and God need not love every human even if God loves some, and it is up to God to decide the form of love appropriate to loving humans. God's love is conditional as God confers his love only if one subordinates his will to that of the divine. (201)

I do say that God need not love any human. But I assert no view in the text about whether God must love all humans if God loves some. I do say that God has wide latitude in the form of love that God has for humans: God could have, for example, chosen to promote our good more or less intensively than God in fact has. But I do not claim that the love of God is in fact conditional, that God loves us only if we subordinate our wills to God. I claim, rather, that part of God's being loving to us is that God extends to all of us, each and every one of us, the assurance that if he or she allies him- or herself with God, all will ultimately be well for him or her. (God's love is like that of the neighbor who invites everyone to her house for a feast: even if the neighbor waits on only those who show up for the party, extending the invitation to all is itself a way of loving all.)

Jordan claims that the love I ascribe to God is "miserly" (202) and "thin" (199), and not at all what we would expect from God. But on my view, God actually promises eternal beatitude to those who do God's will, which doesn't seem miserly or thin to me. The contrast is particularly dramatic since what we might expect from an Anselmian being is total indifference to beings who are as trivial, from the Anselmian being's point of view, as we are. Any positive departure from that, that God has deigned to turn God's eye favorably toward us at all, is astonishing and amazing, an unmerited generosity that our value does not call for. We should be thankful that, though we do not in the least deserve it, God has shown us a way to our ultimate, abundant good.

<sup>8</sup> Jordan does not attempt to identify why making the options if one subordinates oneself to the divine will and if one does not do so both under the threshold for having a life worth living would make any difference to the reasonableness of placing oneself under the Anselmian being's authority.



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