

**Harriet A. Harris (Ed.):**  
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This volume results from a conference held in Oxford, 2009 under the auspices of The British Society for the Philosophy of Religion (BSPR), entitled “God and Morality”. The volume is divided into two parts. Part I reflects “the relationship [...] between our sense of morality and a transcendent cause”, while Part II deals with “the nature of God’s own goodness, and whether it coheres with other divine qualities and with the universe God has created” (9). In the following I will exclusively refer to the contributions of Part I, since I consider these to be of particular interest in the current philosophical and public debate.

A popular way of interpreting the relationship between God and morality, especially within Anglo-American discourse, is to propose that some, or even all, of our moral imperatives come by divine command. However, so-called ‘Divine Command Theories’ are faced with a problem, which is often referred to as the ‘Euthyphro dilemma’ since it resembles a question posed in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. It might be asked: ‘Is what is good good because God wills it; or does God will it because it is good?’ If the first of the two questions is affirmed, the content of the good would apparently be arbitrary. If the second question is affirmed, God seems no longer to be sovereign, but somehow subordinated to (an order of moral)

values and we do not need him to make sense of values, and even perhaps morals, any more. However, the contributions of this volume show that there is much more to be said.

*Timothy Chappell* tells us that the popular version of the Euthyphro dilemma cannot be found in Plato. For in the Euthyphro, the question raised by Socrates goes as follows (10a1-2): 'Is the *holy* [instead of 'the good'] *loved* [instead of 'wanted'] by the gods [instead of 'God'] because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved?' Apart from that, Chappell argues that the so-called 'dilemma' is not a dilemma in a strict sense, because theists can plausibly choose one of the two alternatives, or refuse both of them (as Kraal, for example, shows below). In what follows, Chappell tries to explore Socrates' own attitude towards the divine. The figure of Socrates has often been assumed to disregard the supernatural in favour of employing his own reasoning. In contrast, Chappell points out that Socrates is eventually depicted by Plato as someone who believes in supernatural guidance. Socrates knows himself commanded by *theos* and, moreover, he also takes note of dreams, visions and voices. Chappell suggests that Socrates' critical remarks on the lacking rationality of supernatural inspirations and instructions might not, in fact, intend to discount these phenomena, but provide "a context in which divine commands can be acceptable, by showing a preference for an ethical theism over chaotic polytheism" (16).

*Jaco Gericke* challenges a popular view according to which the Hebrew Bible can clearly be assigned to Divine Command Theory (DCT). Admittedly, he does not seek to deny that examples can be found in the Hebrew Bible, which seem to support DCTs. For example, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, or the giving of the Ten Commandments. On the other hand, as Gericke points out, several counter-examples can be found. To name only one example, there seems to be evidence of an independent moral order against which Yhwh judged as good and sometimes even as being wrong (cf. Ps 44 or Ps 89). Overall, the Hebrew Bible seems to depict God as mediating, rather than creating, divine commandments. Furthermore, God's will usually reflects the moral order and his nature instantiates rather than defines what is (morally) good. According to Gericke, the Euthyphro dilemma did not actually arise for the ancient Hebrews, since the relationship between divinity and morality was seen notably in epistemological terms: Yhwh was seen as a moral instructor or guide, without whom the way to a good and righteous life could not be found.

*Anders Kraal* defends attempts which refer to the doctrine of divine simplicity in order to solve the Euthyphro dilemma. Augustine, Thomas and many others considered God to be simple rather than complex, which means that God's goodness must be an essential part of his divine nature. Then, of course, what is good is neither independent of God's will nor

does it exist only because God wills it. Rather, if God and goodness coincide we need not worry that God's commandments could be arbitrary. Nonetheless, this approach must take account of those philosophers who reject the doctrine of divine simplicity. Alvin Plantinga, for instance, famously argued that if God is identical to each of his properties, then those properties are identical to each other, such that God has only one property and is, in the end, a property himself. According to Plantinga, this is incompatible with classical Christian doctrine. Kraal, however, demonstrates in a quite formal but nevertheless successful way that Plantinga's "claim that the divine simplicity entails that God has but one property or is a property cannot [...] be expressed or obtained by means of standard first-order logic, and so his objection to divine simplicity turns out to be fallacious" (103).

*John Cottingham* discusses three different attempts at explaining the nature of goodness. Naturalists propose that goodness can somehow be reduced to physical properties. Anti-naturalists say that goodness is a *sui generis*, irreducible and non-physical property. Super-naturalists argue for a transcendent source of goodness, namely God. However, as Cottingham rightly points out, to say that goodness derives from God, who is by nature good, does not really explain what goodness is, but eventually leads into an explanatory circle. Nevertheless, regarding God as the source of goodness, as Cottingham sees it, provides the best, even though

hypothetical, explanation of our sense of normativity expressed in moral obligations: "If God himself is in his essential nature merciful, compassionate, just and loving, then when we humans act in the ways just mentioned, we are drawn closer to God, the source of our being and the source of all that is good. Such acts command our allegiance in the strongest way [...]; conversely, in setting our face against them, we are cutting ourselves off from our true destiny, from the ultimate basis of joy and meaningfulness in our lives" (58).

*Roger Scruton* argues that a forgotten but nevertheless fundamental link between religion and morals is to be found in the old-fashioned conceptions of piety and impiety, the sacred and the sacrilegious, the pure and the impure. He argues that modern moral and political philosophy, with its focus on the notions of equality, autonomy and rights, cannot make sense of the above-mentioned concepts and their related moral experience. If, for instance, as Scruton argues, the important institution of marriage, which all traditional cultures believe to be sacred, is merely understood in terms of consent and contract, it cannot survive. Thus, there are no good reasons why persons of the same sex or even groups of persons should not enter into such a contract. However, both evolutionary psychology and sociology fall short in explaining our moral experience in terms of piety etc. For these disciplines show at best that moral experience (has) provided a reproductive advantage, while leaving the question of its

epistemological relevance and reliability unaltered. Therefore, Scruton regards it as one of the most important tasks for philosophy of religion to demonstrate that our moral experience requires a transcendental ground. At least “for the believer”, Scruton says, “there is no clearer proof of God, than the fact that we can make sense of our moral experience only by employing concepts like those of the pious, the sacrilegious and the sacred, which point beyond this world to its transcendental ground” (120).

Two contributions deal with the explanatory power of evolutionary theory with respect to morality. *Robin Attfield* argues that “evolutionary theory does not preclude the possibility of altruistic behaviour, even where altruistic behaviour is not confined to reciprocal altruism [...]” (124). He argues in favour of a non-deterministic understanding of causation, within which causes can be understood as tendencies or powers “which makes things happen unless something intervenes” (127). Thus, our ‘selfish genes’ (Dawkins) may incline us to certain kinds of behaviour, but they do not necessitate it. Other factors, like human kindness, can interfere. Besides, non-reciprocal altruistic behaviour may eventually motivate towards reciprocal altruistic behaviour and thus involve some unnoticed survival advantage. Moreover, the commitment to a movement which involves altruistic ideals may not only express a deep desire for self-transcendence: it may also support the vigour and psychological health of these communities and their individuals. Finally, Attfield

reminds us that evolutionary theory in terms of natural selection is far away from being able to explain or predict human behaviour sufficiently. Again, this leaves room for other intervening factors in terms of social evolution etc.

*Herman Philipse* argues against the plausibility of a strong meta-ethical realism according to which moral truths hold independently of human well-being in terms of overall reproductive fitness. For if, as Philips argues, our moral emotions and convictions have evolved by adaptation, thereby providing reproductive advantage, they might have completely missed the essence of independent existing moral truths. For that reason, 'quasi-eternal moral truths' do not have explanatory power with respect to the formation of our contingent moral convictions, but would be in need of explanation themselves. In the following, Philipse outlines the only type of meta-ethical realism he regards as being compatible with evolutionary theory. Following David Copp, he calls it a society-centred theory of meta-ethical realism. On this account, a moral belief is true if it best serves a society in enabling it to meet its needs and achieve its well-being. Thus, according to this 'Thesis of Adaptive Truth', as Philipse calls it, adaptations that increase social well-being and thereby overall fitness will also tend to approximate moral truth.

All of the presented papers can be regarded as worthwhile contributions to debates dealing with the relationship between religion

and morality. The matter is, of course, far too complex, to allow a final judgement even in one of the discussed problems. Nonetheless, the contributions outlined do not only discuss questions and problems which are of great philosophical and public interest but also challenge very common views and assumptions. For this very reason they deserve attention.