

David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls

Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality.

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Authors David Baggett and Jerry Walls have two main goals in *Good God*: to defend a version of an argument for the existence of God from morality and to rebut objections to their argument based on the Euthyphro Dilemma. The authors expressly intend to carry out their discussion on these topics for a much wider audience than professional academics. The reason for this, they contend, is that their subject is “far too important to be confined to the relatively narrow circles of scholars and academics” (6). While this goal is perhaps commendable, readers will not get very far into *Good God* – perhaps to the application of Goldbach’s conjecture to conceivability limits (59–60) – without recognizing the benefits of some formal training in philosophy (and perhaps theology, for later chapters) for a full appreciation of the discussion. While the authors have made a laudable effort to restrict more complex philosophical discussion to appendices and footnotes, the best audience for this book is still probably upper-undergraduate or graduate students and professional academics.

While the authors promise to present both an argument for the existence of God from morality and a defence of this position against Euthyphro Dilemma objections, only Chapter 1 of the book is devoted to the first objective. Chapters 2 through 7 are devoted to the latter goal, Chapter 8 to the problem of evil, and Chapters 9 and 10 address the application of their view of morality to issues in traditional Christian theology (e.g., how to know God’s will, the afterlife, the resurrection, the Incarnation, and the Trinity). Apart from a rather brief acknowledgement of Kant’s version of the argument from morality, the authors clearly favour the version set forth by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. They argue that the strong sense of moral obligation that is universally accepted constitutes the best evidence we have for the existence of God (as conceived by traditional theism). Other explanations for morality simply fail: Naturalism leads to determinism, and hence eventually to giving up any idea of moral responsibility. Any notion of radical human freedom – of the sort propounded by Nietzsche, Sartre, and other modern existentialists – leads to giving up the idea of morality altogether. And any attempt to follow Henry Sidgwick’s claim that morality does not need theological grounding because basic moral norms are self-evident also leads (as Sidgwick himself seems to have acknowledged) to irresolvable conflicts between the impartial demands that morality can place on an individual to do his duty regardless of personal cost and that individual’s own reasons for pursuing his own self-interest.

The authors seem aware that many academic philosophers will not find this argument for the existence of God very convincing, and so they focus most of their efforts to rebutting familiar objections to it. These objections have been in circulation literally for centuries and are usually based on some version of the Euthyphro Dilemma. In Chapter 2 this argument is explained as giving us two famous “horns”: If God is the ground of moral obligation, then some form of theological voluntarism seems to be true. Voluntarism is the view that there is nothing about an

action – beyond merely being approved or rejected by God – that would allow us to determine what attitude God would take toward it in any possible world. The problem is that voluntarism seems to raise many objections, not the least of which is the problem that God’s commands could be either arbitrary or abhorrent, and we would still have to regard them as “moral”. If by contrast some form of nonvoluntarism is adopted, and God’s commands are seen as constrained by reason or something external to God’s will, God simply fails to be the foundation of morality. Any such constraint seems to infringe on God’s sovereignty and authority. So if God is the sovereign moral judge of everyone (as standardly taught in Abrahamic religions), it is not clear how he can remain in this role while using a standard external to himself. Worse still, the authors contend, since nonvoluntarism “denies that God is metaphysically relevant to morality at all” (39) it cannot support any interesting argument for God’s existence from morality.

This reasoning drives the authors on a search for an acceptable kind of voluntarism as their main solution to the Euthyphro Dilemma. Rejecting a straightforward acceptance of the implications of voluntarism (of the sort espoused by William of Ockham), they claim instead to have found a better solution in the “Anselmian” conception of God. This involves what they refer to as “theistic activism”; the idea that God’s creative power is what sustains reality and that everything apart from God is dependent upon him. Simply put, the world that we know and live in is an impossible one without God (101). God’s necessity is found both in the fact that he *necessarily exists* and that he is *necessarily good*. If this is true, then there simply cannot be any other basis for morality than God and his inherent goodness. Moreover, this solves most Euthyphro problems because if God necessarily exists and is necessarily good, then his goodness forbids him from commanding anything abhorrent or arbitrary (132). Seeing morality this way, they argue, is what it means to take theism seriously as a world view: “Our alternative suggestion... is predicated on a reminder to our atheistic friends that the world as they conceive of it is one that we consider to be fictional, no less than they think that about a theistic world. We are intentionally attempting to take seriously the implications that one and only one of these two competing world views is the true picture” (100–101).

Anyone familiar with the philosophical literature on divine command theory for the last 40 years or so will recognize the influence of R. M. Adams’ solution to the Euthyphro Dilemma, an influence the authors readily acknowledge (111–112). Central to their Anselmian solution are claims of God’s necessary existence and goodness. It is unclear, however, just how much the authors’ solution is a truly independent, standalone argument for the existence of God and the foundation of morality. Their entire project seems to depend in some fairly basic sense on the defensibility of some version of the ontological argument for the existence of God. The authors disavow any such dependence, however, and insist that the moral argument they offer can on its own “give us *another* good reason to believe in God’s necessary existence” (52, emphasis added). This is because “one of the key features of ‘moral realism’ is the existence of necessary moral truths... [a]nd we contend that it certainly appears more likely that, if God is the ultimate metaphysical foundation of morality, and part of morality involves necessity, the Author must exist necessarily as well” (52). This way of stating their argument seems remarkably incapable of restatement in a manner that is not objectionably circular nor one which does not require an independent argument for God’s necessary existence.

Even without this problem, however, it is also unclear how the Anselmian solution offered really avoids the very same problems facing voluntaristic solutions, nor why committed theists must resort to their position in order to avoid a nonvoluntaristic solution in the first instance. God is, according to the authors, necessarily “good”. And, just as for standard voluntarists, there is no independent standard – metaphysical or otherwise – of morality apart from God’s commands, there is no independent standard of goodness with respect to God’s goodness as well. It is not clear, however, why the same voluntaristic problems do not plague the notion of God’s goodness as much as they do God’s moral commands. If the only standard of goodness is God’s necessary goodness, we must be prepared for this to have no recognizable features of what we might normally identify as good. The problems of arbitrariness and abhorrence only seem pushed back to a different moral concept. Moreover, it is also not clear why a nonvoluntarist solution to the Euthyphro Dilemma is not a reasonable option for committed theists. (It certainly has been regarded as such for many theists over the centuries, from Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages to Richard Swinburne in our own time.)

The necessity of God’s existence and goodness that Baggett and Walls argue form the basis of morality seems better attached to moral concepts sourced in reason rather than in the will or nature of a supernatural being. As such, moral truths as necessary truths (as, for example, Kant seems to have thought) can be implied from any similar set of circumstances, whether in a universe where God exists or one where God does not. That this is a view which concedes too much to an atheistic worldview is not at all obvious. That God stands along with us in finding morality a rational constraint on his actions, wherever (and if ever) circumstances are similar, seems to highlight the Judeo-Christian teaching that we exist, in some sense, in God’s image. It also means that God expects us to live by standards that hold independently and equally for him just as much as they do for us. It does not imply, as the authors seem to allege, that it is more likely that God does not exist at all.

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