

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

In this interesting and important new book Mark Murphy artfully presents novel ideas (from the contemporary perspective) about the nature of God and perfection, and uses these ideas to generate significant conclusions about God's ethics, the problem of evil, and the relationship between God and human creatures.

Murphy divides the book into two parts: Part I on 'The Ethics of an Anselmian Being' (chapters 1-6), and Part II on 'God's Ethics' (chapters 7-9). In chapter one Murphy lays out some core features of what an Anselmian perfect being is like. Importantly, Murphy doesn't treat 'Anselmian being' as synonymous with 'God.' For while God is an Anselmian being (hereafter AB), there are ways an AB could be that would make the being not God.

Murphy endorses the view that *each* of the great-making properties of the AB is possessed by the AB in that property's most valuable form (as opposed to merely the collection of properties being the greatest such a collection could be holistically). Murphy also endorses the view that the metaphysical limits on such a holistic combination of great-making traits allows for the AB 'to be sufficiently great, absolutely speaking' (17). The high standard of perfection these endorsements generate is an important driving factor in the book.

The question of chapter two is whether the AB is loving. Murphy's answer is that the AB is loving only to the extent that the AB's moral goodness so entails. Chapter three in turn questions whether the AB is morally good. Of importance in this discussion is a kind of moral goodness that Murphy calls 'familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness,' which holds that the welfare of rational beings 'generally is one of the values to which morally good agency positively responds' (24). The book's central linchpin comes in Murphy's denial that the AB is bound by familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness (although we humans are so bound).

In making his case that the AB is not bound by familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness, Murphy begins by noting the 'gap' between '(1) X is fundamentally good (bad) for A' and '(2) X is a reason for anyone to promote (prevent) X' (49). He then argues that the dominant moral theories that have tried to show that if (1) is true, (2) is true, succeed only in applying the conclusion to *humans*, but not the AB. Murphy assesses various forms of Hobbesianism, Humeanism, Aristotelianism, and Kantianism, and concludes that they all fail. Each of these arguments is thoughtfully offered, but Murphy's line of reasoning here, on the whole, feels incomplete given that neither non-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics nor any form of consequentialism are considered, which I take to be the best candidates for ethical theories capable of closing the gap between (1) and (2).

Murphy sees being bound by welfare-oriented moral goodness as providing *requiring* reasons to *promote* human welfare (58). Following Joshua Gert, Murphy distinguishes requiring reasons from (merely) justifying reasons. One fails to act rationally when one fails to act on a requiring reason (unless one has superseding reasons). In contrast, a justifying reason can be rationally acted on, but it is not irrational not to act on it (59). Murphy contrasts promotion of value with respect of value. Promotion of value requires seeking to increase it and to prevent setbacks. Respect is a weaker condition that requires restraint from diminishing or destroying that value.

Murphy puts these distinctions to work in chapters four and five. The key position argued for in chapter four is that the AB has only justifying reasons, not requiring reasons, to promote the well-being of his creatures—thus denying that the AB is obligated to promote creaturely value (67). Murphy's argument is grounded in the AB's total goodness and sovereignty. On Murphy's account,

because the AB is the source of all goodness (and because the agent-neutral value of creatures occurs only through participation in this goodness) creation adds no goodness to the world (although it adds good things). And because no goodness is added by creatures, the AB has no requiring reasons to promote their good.

Murphy's conception of sovereignty includes the power of discretion. The AB's discretion is increased as requiring reasons dictating the AB's actions decrease. On these grounds, Murphy takes the idea that the AB 'could be made to act by some creature as final cause' as contrary to the AB's sovereignty (79).

There's space to push back on both lines of reasoning. Even granting that creatures *add* no goodness to the AB's complete goodness, it seems natural (to me at least) to think that permitting good things to flounder and reach very far short of their potential (without doing so in order to achieve some counterbalancing good) would result in a *subtraction* of goodness, and because it would be contrary to the AB's nature to permit such a subtraction, that the AB has requiring reason not to allow such things.

Concerning sovereignty, by using discretion to create, it is not creatures that make the AB act, but rather the AB itself through choosing to take an action (creation) that requires other actions (promoting the value of those created). The argument is not that the AB has requiring reasons to create (Murphy takes the AB to have justifying but not requiring reasons to create). Rather, the counterargument is that if the AB chooses to create, part of that choice is to promote the well-being of the created. Thus, it seems to me that the AB having requiring reasons to promote creaturely well-being doesn't diminish the AB's sovereignty, but may diminish *per impossible* the AB's goodness.

The accompanying thesis of chapter five is the less controversial position that the AB has requiring reasons to respect his creatures—i.e., not to *intend* the destruction or diminishment of creaturely well-being (68). The bulk of the chapter consists in parsing how the AB can foresee evil without intending evil and an argument that the AB's reasons not to intend evil cannot be overridden.

Chapter six focuses on showing how Murphy's denials that the AB is morally perfect and is bound by welfare-oriented moral goodness avoids current formulations of arguments from evil, which all rest on these assumptions that Murphy has denied. Murphy also distinguishes the ethical basis for his solution from the epistemological basis of the skeptical theist's solution to the problem of evil. The end of this chapter bridges to Part II of the book by highlighting a different sort of argument from evil—namely, whether this view of the AB makes the AB unworthy of worship or allegiance.

In chapter seven Murphy argues that the AB is worthy of worship, but denies that the AB necessarily requires our allegiance, due to the potential difference in reasons between us and the AB. But Murphy recognizes that for many theists, their concern is not about allegiance to the AB generally, but about allegiance to God. Chapters eight and nine address this concern, along with renewed concerns about allegiance and the problem of evil that arise from considering specific conceptions of God. Murphy's solution, in short, is that God, by his own volition, has entered into covenants with us, whereby we are assured of things that make our allegiance to him appropriate. On this account, God chose rather than was obligated to love us, and gratitude and allegiances are the appropriate responses.

It's worth noting a few plausible counterarguments that I believe aren't sufficiently addressed in this book. First, Murphy insufficiently responds to the ideas that God incurs moral obligations via the creator/creature relationship. Murphy writes that 'the only thing that happens in creation is causal' and that 'we don't have any good arguments' that God's creating makes new ways in which God acting would be defective (177). But creation is also relational, and those relationships seem capable of generating just such plausible arguments.

Second, Murphy's arguments insufficiently address the plausible position that when creatures suffer, not only is that bad for them, but bad *simpliciter*—i.e., that the world is worse off, *ceteris paribus*, when suffering occurs. Murphy deflects the AB's potential reasons to promote our welfare by emphasizing how increases or decreases in our welfare are good or bad *for us*, often to the exclusion of the consideration that these things are simply good or bad.

Third, Murphy's conclusions in chapter nine address what God has promised and chosen to do for 'us.' But who 'us' refers to isn't ever thoroughly discussed, and plausibly refers only to 'the faithful' (192). To the extent that Murphy's conclusions in chapter nine don't apply to all humans, one might worry about whether they truly are solutions at all.

Among the many laudable features of this book is how carefully the various ideas and arguments Murphy puts forward work together. I have had to omit much of interest and importance about the book in this review, and I encourage those interested in this topic to read the additional details for themselves. For while I am not persuaded to accept most of Murphy's conclusions, his arguments have given his positions the sort of uncomfortable viability that will no doubt cause me to wrestle with this book's arguments and conclusions many times more.

This book is well-written, interesting, and deserves to have a profound impact on the contemporary discussions in philosophy of religion and ethics. It is a book I would heartily recommend to anyone interested in these fields.

**Mark Satta**, Harvard Law School