

7-1-1998

## Book Review: Religion And Morality

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### Recommended Citation

Beckwith, Francis (1998) "Book Review: Religion And Morality," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol15/iss3/10>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Religion & Morality*, by **D.Z. Phillips**. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. Pp. xix, 355. \$54.95 (cloth).

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The relationship between religious belief and morality has been central to philosophical reflection from the beginning in both Jerusalem and Athens. Consider the serpent's postmodern appeal to Eve's personal autonomy ("You will not surely die") and self-realization ("For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil") as reasons for abandoning the restraints of religious dogma (i.e., God's command not to eat the fruit). In *the Euthyphro*, Socrates asks his young interlocutor whether something is good because the gods love it or whether the gods love it because it is good. Although there have been numerous solutions offered for this apparent dilemma,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that many other questions have since arisen, most of which can be traced back to both that Socratic dialogue as well as that conversation in Eden.

Some of these suggestions addressed in *Religion and Morality*, edited by D.Z. Phillips. The contributions to this volume have their origin in papers delivered in February 1994 at the fifteenth annual conference on the philosophy of religion at the Claremont Graduate School. In addition to the book's introduction, Phillips authors a concluding essay ("Voices in Discussion") which is based on the notes he took on discussions among the conference participants between the presentations of the contributors' papers. It is a very helpful piece that guides the reader in drawing connections between the differing issues and perspectives published in the book.

This book is divided into six parts, each of which contains two essays from authors who each take a point of view different from the other. Because all of these essays are rich and informative, I cannot possibly do justice to their contents in this review. For this reason, I will simply summarize the highlights of each while occasionally interjecting some comments here and there.

In Part I, essays by Raimond Gaita ("Is Religion an Infantile Morality?") and Richard Schacht ("Reply: Morality, Humanity, and Historicity") address the question of whether a morality's emphasis on guilt is infantile, an indication that the morality is narrowly conceived. Gaita argues that when one feels guilt when one harms another, it is not merely a psychological result of comprehending the harm, but is essential to what it means to truly understand that one has wronged another. This occurs because there is an aspect to human beings which is sacred. That is, one recognizes the absolute value of human persons. Although Gaita knows that the concept of the sacred

has its origin in religion, he wants to maintain its legitimacy apart from its historical genesis.

In his reply, Schacht asserts that absolute value (and absolute worth), which Gaita wants to uphold even without its religious grounding, is dependent on such a metaphysical foundation and without it must be abandoned. But this is no reason to despair, writes Schacht, for "the demise of such a conception of morality is no more tantamount to the end of all normativity than the death of God spells the end of all religion; for the former is as inseparable from all enhancement of life as the latter is wedded to its affirmation, when reconceived as its celebration." (55). Instead of the "nihilistic end of morality and religion," the passing of infantile morality, Schacht maintains, may result in religion's and morality's—"and our—coming of age." (55). To this reviewer's disappointment, however, Schacht does not show how morality can be grounded if its metaphysical foundations have been jettisoned.

In part II, authors Robert Adams ("The Concept of a Divine Command") and Clark A. Kucheman ("Reply: Moral Duty and God: A View from the Left") deal with the issue of morality and divine commands. Adams is not committed to the first half of the Euthyphro dilemma, something is good because God loves it. He is *not* arguing that goodness is grounded in God's commands, but rather, some of our obligations to do what is good are found in the commands of God known by special revelation. He works this out with great analytical skill, addressing objections as well as admitting the shortcomings of his view.

Although he, like Adams, seeks an objective ground for morality, Kucheman argues for a version of Kant's categorical imperative. Instead of divine commands, Kucheman's moral precepts are derived from "my self-imposed fundamental moral duty to treat free 'I's, bearers of spirit, including first of all myself, always as free 'I's, bearers of spirit, and never as unfree 'its'." (97). For Kucheman, this means that allegiance to God would conflict with one's moral duty. Writes Kucheman:

Since ultimate allegiance to *anything whatever* that is external to me as an "I" entails *freely* deciding to decide what to believe theoretically and what to do practically *unfreely*, that is, by a "heteronomous subjection of the will", and so treating myself as an unfree "it" rather than as a free "I", I (and all other "I's) ought as a matter of moral duty *not* to be ultimately allegiant to this sovereignly-willing creator. (97)

It is no revelation to conclude that an autonomous neo-Kantian would not find moral a universe created by the Christian God who makes demands that may conflict with the neo-Kantian's autonomy. But why should the Christian who is not neo-Kantian (perhaps she holds to a rich Thomistic view of natural law) have to conclude from this that the neo-Kantian is right after all? Could not the Christian conclude that since the Christian God does exist and has revealed him-

self both in Scripture and in nature that neo-Kantianism is simply wrong?

Take, for example, the question of whether the state ought to permit same-sex marriage. Although I do not know Kucheman's views on this issue, it seems Kucheman would argue that to say that such an institution is immoral and violates natural law (as well as Scripture) and thus ought to be prohibited would be to violate the autonomy of those of the same gender who want to consummate their love in the trappings of a lawful union. However, this seems to beg the question, at least in the minds of those who oppose such unions, for the appeal to autonomy as the basis for moral action seems to assume a metaphysical position that affirms that *all* traditional notions about gender, marriage, and family are phenomena that are the result of artificial social institutions rather than the result of an immutable human nature endowed to us by either God or Nature. On the other hand, those who oppose same-sex marriage maintain that autonomy and consent are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for an act to be legally or morally permissible and traditional notions of gender, marriage, and family, however differently expressed throughout human history and/or better understood as the result of moral reflection, are part of the furniture of the universe and are such that their continued existence is essential to maintaining the moral ecology of human society. Understood in these terms, a neo-Kantian analysis of the moral permissibility of certain institutions, divorced from metaphysical considerations, seems empty.<sup>2</sup>

Part III concerns the problem of evil. Marilyn McCord Adams ("Evil and the God-Who-Does-Nothing-In-Particular") argues that some type of theodicy is necessary if the problem of evil is to be adequately resolved. Adams maintains that free will defenses proposed by certain analytic philosophers of religion simply do not work since there is just too much gratuitous and apparently unnecessary evil in the world. According to Adams, we need a theodicy that is capable of making sense out of a world full of horrendous evils that result in human suffering. We need a theodicy that can give coherent meaning to lives that seem like a series of unconnected parts. In his reply, Rowan Williams ("Reply: Redeeming Sorrows") is not satisfied with Adams' direction. He maintains that since there is an incommensurability between our experiences of suffering and God, "even the best and subtlest of theodicies cannot but seem a strategy for evading most of this" (148). In other words, attempts at reconciling "God's ways" with "our suffering" do not fully capture either the divine or the human.

In part IV, authors Philip L. Quinn ("Relativism and Torture: Religious and Secular Responses") and Joseph Runzo ("Reply: Ethical Universality and Ethical Relativism") deal with the question of whether it is possible to make philosophically justified moral prescriptions that are applicable in all times, all places, and all people. In order to answer this question, Quinn and Runzo critically discuss the moral prohibition against torture, which many ethicists would claim is a universal moral prescription. Quinn believes that the wrongness of torture

is based on a *prima facie* moral duty that cannot be overridden. In order to defend this position, according to Quinn, one may argue that torture is wrong because human beings are made in the image of God. However, this will not do the trick for those who deny that human beings possess such a property. Some are atheists who believe that torture is wrong for other reasons. And some are people (including atheists and theists) who simply believe that torture, although *prima facie* wrong, is sometimes permissible. Although people, such as Quinn, who believe that torture is always wrong consider themselves justified in having that belief, they need not, according to Quinn, "and for charity's sake probably should not, deny that [their] opponents are also justified in believing that torture is not always wrong" (155). This conclusion is the result of Quinn's epistemology: "after all, being justified is a contextual affair.... Epistemic relativism with respect to being justified seems close to being undeniable" (155).

Runzo seems to agree with Quinn that there are no secular or religious arguments that would convince everyone that torture ought to be prohibited. However, Runzo still wants to say that torture is universally wrong. To put it another way: "Morality is relative, yet the wrongness of torture is universal" (186). In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, Runzo maintains that "there may be overlapping but different world-views which provide different supporting conceptions of why one should never employ torture if one is to act in a way that respects others as persons. Indeed, we would expect variant arguments to support this prohibition on torture even *within* any secular or religious tradition" (185).

Part V consists of two very interesting articles—one by Jack V. Canfield ("Ethics Post-Zen") and the other by Frank J. Hoffman ("Reply: Before 'Post-Zen': A Discussion of Buddhist Ethics")—which discuss questions concerning the relationship between Zen Buddhist ethics and its notion of the self. Since Western philosophers have done so little work integrating their philosophical interests with non-Western modes of thought, these two pieces are quite helpful.

The question of whether religion is the basis for morality is the focus of Part VI. R.W. Beardsmore ("Atheism and Morality") argues that moral concepts are not dependent on religion, although he maintains that there is something unique to religion for which morality has no analogue. He admits that it is wrong that religion has been treated condescendingly by some atheists, but he also points out that atheism has been a victim of that posture as well. He argues, among other things, that even though much of moral language is rooted in religion, moral concepts can survive the demise of a religious context. It seems to me, however, that Beardsmore does not adequately address the question of the ontological grounding of moral claims. Certainly Beardsmore is right that one can be a good atheist and also employ moral language divorced from its conceptual roots. But that is a far cry from answering the ontological question: Can atheism ground *the Good*? Perhaps one way to deal with this is to defend moral constructivism (e.g., Rawls' theory of justice) and deny moral realism, since the

former seems to fit better in atheistic discourse. Fair enough, but this results in moral concepts not having the same meaning as they do in theistic discourse.<sup>3</sup> In reply to Beardsmore, James Conant ("Reply: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility") gives a careful analysis of the way three very different philosophers have answered the question of whether one can divorce morality from religion without losing morality's intelligibility.

There are so many important insights in and aspects to the papers in this book that I cannot possibly mention them all in this brief review. This is an outstanding collection and an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about the relationship between morality and religion. I highly recommend this book to graduate students as well as professors of philosophy, theology, and religious studies.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Janine Marie Idziak, "In Search of 'Good Positive Reasons' for an Ethics of Divine Commands: A Catalogue of Arguments," in *Readings in Christian Ethics, Volume 1: Theory and Method*, eds. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 50-61.

2. Some political philosophers in the Kantian tradition, such as John Rawls, believe such a divorce between metaphysics and politics is essential to a just regime. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For a discussion of this question by two Christian philosophers, see Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

3. See George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); and J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 97-135.

*Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, by **Graham Oppy**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xviii, 376. \$59.95 (Cloth)

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Professor Oppy's ambitious book may well provide the most comprehensive coverage of ontological arguments that can be found to date. It is hard to identify another book on the topic which constitutes as rich and extensive a source for such arguments. Oppy has managed to pull together a remarkable wealth of material, and it seems a safe bet that there is no type of ontological argument developed thus far that is worthy of philosophical note but not presented and carefully assessed in this text. Thus, what we have here is arguably nothing short of an intellectual Feast of St. Anselm. Oppy discusses (these are his categorizations) Definitional arguments, Conceptual arguments, Modal arguments<sup>1</sup>