

4-1-2005

Book Review: An Essay On Divine Authority

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Recommended Citation

Mar, Gary (2005) "Book Review: An Essay On Divine Authority," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss2/10>

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(Mill's tyrannical majority it would seem), might well incline us to hold out for moral constraints on politics, on law, even if they be of the thick, no doubt objectionable, Lockean kind.

An Essay on Divine Authority by Mark C. Murphy. Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2002, 197 pages.

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Mark Murphy's *An Essay on Divine Authority* is a new and original work in the distinguished Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion edited by William Alston. The new Problem of Divine Authority is that of (1) answering whether God has practical authority over created rational beings, and (2) providing an explanation of the extent of that authority. Why has this problem been unduly neglected?

Philosophers have failed to see the Problem of Divine Authority, according to Murphy, because they have been blinded by widely held philosophical assumptions. On the one hand, philosophers who assume that "it is a platitude that God is authoritative" regard the thesis as tautological like 'bachelors are unmarried' and hence trivially true. On the other hand, philosophers who regard Euthyphro's dilemma as decisive against Divine Command ethics, assume that the dilemma refutes the Divine authority thesis. Both assumptions, Murphy argues, are unwarranted. Euthyphro's dilemma is directed against normative Divine Command theories of ethics that postulate God's authority as a supreme moral principle; however, the defender of Divine Authority is not committed to such a view. Moreover, even the truism 'all bachelors are unmarried' becomes an open question when regarded as "a *de re* question, a question about why *these* particular bachelors are unmarried." The Problem of Divine Authority is not so easily dismissed.

Murphy's examination depends on distinguished between the objective claim of God's being the supreme authority and the subjective claim of God's being practically authoritative for me. *Practical authority*, according to Murphy's explication, is a relationship in which the *dictates* of one party (e.g., God) gives another party (e.g., a creative rational being) a *decisive* reason for action. The reason for action is a fact that must be *complete* (it includes "all that makes an action choiceworthy") and *compact* (it includes *only* those facts that are, at least in part, constitutive of choiceworthiness). Given the infinity of God's good-making attributes and the finitude of created rational beings, however, one wonders whether the requirement of completeness could be fulfilled in principle, let alone be required for rationality.

Moreover, God's having *causal* control over an agent's actions does not imply that God is practically authoritative. For God to be *practically authoritative* over an agent, Murphy explains, God's telling agent *x* to perform an action φ must "*constitutively actualize*" a reason for *x* to φ , namely, a reason, which if undefeated, is decisive. Explaining just how God's dictates might constitutively actualize a reason leads Murphy to articulate three grades of Divine Authority.

Let 'Cx' abbreviate 'x is a created rational being' and 'Gx' abbreviate 'God has practical authority over x,' which is analyzed as 'for any action φ , God's telling x to φ constitutively actualizes a decisive reason for x to φ .' Using this notation, we can succinctly formalize three Strong Authority Theses (SATs):

Strong Thesis:	$\forall x(Cx \rightarrow Gx)$
Stronger Thesis:	$\forall x(Cx \rightarrow \Box Gx)$
Strongest Thesis:	$\Box(x)(Cx \rightarrow Gx)$

The *Strong* Authority Thesis is the claim that God has *universal* practical authority over all created rational beings. The *Stronger* Thesis says that all created rational beings are *essentially* under God's practical authority, and the *Strongest* Thesis says it is a *necessarily true* that all created rational beings are under God's practical authority. (Note that there are even stronger theses than Murphy's 'Strongest', e.g., $\Box \forall x(Cx \rightarrow \Box Gx)$, or 'it is a necessary truth that all created rational beings are essentially under God's practical authority.'). It turns out that all three of the SATs fail.

This result is not surprising. The standard modal reading of the 'Stronger Thesis', for example, only requires that all *actual* creative rational beings are necessarily under God's practical authority, but leaves it open whether some *possible* created rational being need not be under God's practical authority. However, the critical issue is whether God's dictating an action could, by itself, constitute a decisive reason for a created rational being to perform that action. Murphy finds this troublesome and so considers a close relative of the strong authority theses. The 'Compliance Thesis' does not require that God's dictates themselves *constitute* reasons for compliance, but only that God has *some reasons* and hence that created rational beings are acting irrationally if they *fail to comply* with God's dictates. This substitute thesis, Murphy argues, captures what is plausible about the SATs without the implication that God's authoritativeness decisively demands compliance just because God so dictates.

In subsequent chapters, Murphy argues that Perfect Being Theology gives us no reason to affirm the SATs, that neither metaethical nor normative Divine Command ethics gives us any reason to hold the SATs, and that there are no convincing moral arguments for the SATs. With regard to Orthodox Christianity, none of the scriptural truths that God is worthy of worship, that God is King over Israel, or that God is sovereign over all creation requires the SATs. Murphy, moreover, is not satisfied to recommend skepticism: he claims that rationalism demands that "we ought not merely to withhold belief in any of the authority theses; we ought, rather, to disbelieve them."

While admiring the intellectual virtuosity of the Murphy's analyses, readers may find Murphy's solution to the Problem of Divine Authority disingenuous. Murphy admits that while God has authority over all creation "loosely speaking", God "strictly speaking" does not have authority over all created rational beings, but only those human beings who have submitted themselves to divine authority and "to make God authoritative over him or over her." Here Murphy concedes, "I am proceeding largely

on the basis of an argument from ignorance, I do not know of any way for us to come under divine authority except through submission to divine rule, and I am proceeding on the assumption there are no other ways."

Murphy gives two specifically Christian applications of his solution. Murphy endorses a natural law approach to ethics and explains in detail why the arguments of Grisez and Finnis, the foremost advocates of natural law, fail to show the intrinsic immorality of homosexual conduct. Murphy's solution is that, on the basis of God's authoritativeness, the Christian can rationally affirm that homosexual conduct is categorically wrong even without having the support of natural law. Murphy also says his solution explains why Christians, but not non-Christians, are bound to God's command to "love thy neighbor". Having submitted themselves to God's authority, "Christians are ... under a weighty moral burden that persons generally are not, one that requires them to sacrifice their own good in ways that most of us would not choose to sacrifice if it were up to us." Scripture's more winsome portrayal is that believers are transformed into a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:5) with a "ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18) that is an outworking of God's purpose of "reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (v. 19). Jesus' command "take my yoke upon you... [because] my yoke is easy and my burden is light" highlights the contrast between Murphy's non-authoritative abstract conception of divine dictates with the incarnational authoritativeness of God's revealed Word.

Identifying himself as a Roman Catholic, Murphy nevertheless claims that his general arguments about Divine authority "do not appeal to claims about God that are affirmed by Christianity but denied by either of the other Abrahamic faiths" and "could easily be addressed to those whose conception of God is that of Judaism or Islam as to those whose conception is that of Christianity." Could Murphy be mistaken in assuming that nothing is lost in reasoning about the monotheistic *concept* of the God of Abraham, Jesus, and Mohammed?

Recall that Murphy argued that even the truism that 'all bachelors are unmarried' is an open question when considered a *de re* question. Similarly, *de re* truths about *God* opens up possibilities not available to purely *de dicto* reasoning about the God of philosophical theism. Even if one could create counterexamples to support the claim that the *concept* of God does not imply that God is practically authoritative over created rational beings, this would not preclude that *God* is authoritative. One could argue by analogy, for example, that godly parents (*objectively*) have authority over their children even if the children are too young (*subjectively*) to articulate their reasons for obeying the dictates of their parents. Similarly, why couldn't God in fact be authoritative (*objectively*) whether or not, created rational beings could (*subjectively*) articulate a complete, compact, and constitutively actualizing reason for obedience? Such considerations might lead one to criticize Murphy's treatment of the Problem of Divine Authority as too subjective.

Although this marks a contemplative turn, I want to suggest on the contrary, that contemporary analytic philosophy of religion may suffer from a *poverty* of subjectivity—the failure to articulate in their analyses the authoritative dimensions of religious experience. Thomas Merton wisely

observed, “[T]he subjectivity essential to love does not detract from objective reality but adds to it. Love brings us into relationship with an objectively existing reality, but because it is love it is able to bridge the gap between subject and object and *commune in the subjectivity of the one loved*. Only love can effect this kind of union and give this kind of knowledge-by-identity with the beloved....” (“The Power and Meaning of Love,” in *Disputed Questions*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: NY, 1976, p. 103.)

Murphy’s book is an original and rigorous exercise in articulating a newly defined Problem of Divine Authority. If contemporary analytic philosophers of religion are to make progress on this important problem, perhaps in addition to delighting in the deployment of the technology of logical and modal reasoning, we need also to consider exploring, more contemplatively, the compelling and authoritative dimensions of loving God.

Metapher und Lebenswelt Hans Blumenbergs Metaphorologie als Lebenswelthermeneutik und ihr religionsphänomenologischer Horizont, by Philipp Stoellger. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000. XVI + 583 pp. 99.00 Euros.

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This rich and learned book is not for the faint hearted. It contains 583 pages of densely (but beautifully) printed reflection upon the thought of German philosopher Hans Blumenberg’s theological sources and theological relevance. It is well worth the effort—one can glean many insights and profit from the immense learning of this book: a splendid attempt to analyse the philosophical significance of one of the most interesting twentieth century German philosophers, Hans Blumenberg. Blumenberg has stimulated much discussion on particular issues, but this is an attempt to interpret his *Œuvre* as a whole and to reflect upon its theological ramifications. Stoellger’s thesis is that theology deals with the metaphors of religious language, and Blumenberg can help articulate the theological project.

Stoellger’s choice is *prima facie* surprising. Blumenberg was not a theologian and in many ways as a philosopher he was, though not hostile to Christianity, convinced that modern culture and philosophy ought to extricate and emancipate itself from the Christian legacy—as indeed the title of his most famous work, *The Legitimacy of Modernity*, suggests. Stoellger, however, endeavours to demonstrate that Blumenberg is a rich resource for theology in moving away from a ‘Logik des Begriffs,’ i.e., a rigidly conceptual logic, to a *Metaphorologie*, i.e. a logic of metaphors within a hermeneutical phenomenology of the experienced world.

Stoellger’s fine book is a detailed analysis of the major works of Blumenberg from his early theological work to his final work on Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*. We also find detailed and illuminating discussions of Vico, Ricoeur, Derrida and Jüngel, as well as Hick and Aristotle. Stoellger’s discussion of metaphor and symbol is incisive and informed by a striking