

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 37 | Issue 3

Article 9

7-1-2020

Anne Jeffrey, GOD AND MORALITY

Benjamin J. Bruxvoort Lipscomb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Lipscomb, Benjamin J. Bruxvoort (2020) "Anne Jeffrey, GOD AND MORALITY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2020.37.3.9

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol37/iss3/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

God and Morality, by Anne Jeffrey. Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 84. \$18 (paperback).

BENJAMIN J. BRUXVOORT LIPSCOMB, Houghton College

I haven't read anything quite like Anne Jeffrey's *God and Morality* before. It's a new entry in the Cambridge Elements series, the aim of which is to provide "concise and structured introductions to . . . central topics in the philosophy of religion" as a resource for academics. Contributors to the series are also charged to develop "new ideas and arguments from a unique viewpoint."

The book is less objectively novel than it was novel to me. Books of this kind ("guides," "very short introductions") are now ubiquitous, and play a vital role in helping academics get up to speed on topics ancillary to their main areas of scholarship and teaching. I knew such books were out there; I just haven't made use of them yet.

It is important to stress the genre of *God and Morality*, lest one hold it to the wrong standard. I mean no criticism of Jeffrey's coverage or rigor, both of which are impressive. She is (as one would expect) more conversant with the arguments she canvasses than most readers will be. She is more conversant with many of these arguments than I am. Having said that: part of Jeffrey's assignment was to condense a vast swath of scholarly debate into just under 70 pages (the official page count—84—includes front and back matter and a bibliography). One needs only consider the project in those terms to appreciate the challenge she faced—and to predict the density of the resulting exposition.

God and Morality is divided into three main sections: on God and normativity, God and moral epistemology, and God and moral motivation. Each section then deals with a major metaethical domain in which some philosophers have thought that theism "makes a difference" (1). The purported difference usually has apologetic import: theism is supposed to ground normativity better than alternative views, or provide the most compelling response to evolutionary debunking arguments, or better underwrite moral hope. For each domain, Jeffrey contends that "thin theism"—roughly, the bare idea of an "omniGod"—has less difference-making power than the "thicker," more specified theisms one encounters in historic religious traditions. The constructive argument of the book, then, is a cumulative-case argument: by highlighting repeatedly the philosophical consequences of beliefs about (say) the character of God, Jeffrey hopes to persuade her readers not to set aside "substantive assumptions about divine attributes or action" (63). It is these substantive assumptions on



which some of the most important questions in the philosophy of religion turn. Whose God?, Jeffrey prods us to ask; which divinity?

In keeping with her task, each of Jeffrey's sections touches on a diverse array of arguments. She seems determined to provide her readers with a cursory summary of any argument that clears a modest threshold of prominence in the contemporary literature. She does her best to provide an architectonic account of these arguments, and this is itself an aid to the book's intended audience.

For example, in the section on normativity, Jeffrey begins by sorting arguments about God and normativity into three groups, based on the normative concept they foreground: objective value (i.e., moral facts), categorical obligation, or goodness. Each of the resulting sub-sections recounts a number of arguments, back and forth. So, for moral facts, the dialectic goes like this: you might think moral facts require a transcendent ground; but what about the queerness of such purported facts?; OK, but can we get clear about when and why a fact is too "queer" to accept?; perhaps not, but do moral facts even require a ground? Jeffrey adds a few closing comments, and it's on to the next subsection. Between the density of Jeffrey's exposition and her constantly shifting focus, the material demands more concentration than most journal articles (the discussion of the "No Source" objection—new to me—was particularly challenging). It's a little exhausting, if you read too much of it at a go. Still, both Jeffrey's schema and dialectical exposition are instructive. If I were teaching a course in philosophy of religion, and wanted to include the topic of God and normativity, Jeffrey's overview would supply me not only with subtopics and a bibliography, but also with an organizational plat for discussing these matters over one or more sessions. (And likewise for each of the other sections.)

Unsurprisingly, not every major argument in the literature can be made to fit Jeffrey's schemata. I am of two minds about the wisdom of Jeffrey's (or perhaps her editor's) decision about how to handle this—which was, again, to say something about every argument that clears a certain threshold of current prominence. Thus the section on God and normativity concludes with a couple of paragraphs on "postmodernist" objections to ontotheology (which would, if accepted, undercut all the apologetic arguments Jeffrey has been considering) and a couple of pages on Mark Murphy's *explanans*-driven argument about God's relationship to moral reality. Neither discussion can begin to motivate the view in question; all they can do is note the existence of such views and sketch them briefly. Also, neither argument fits tidily into Jeffrey's schema for this section. Something is achieved: a reader unfamiliar with Murphy's recent work (say) would become aware of a novel argument she might wish to explore. This kind of thing makes Jeffrey's book less book-like, though, and more like a reference work. I'm not sure this is a complaint. It's more an observation on the inevitable consequences of a judgment call.

The same judgment call ("summarize everything and schematize it as best you can") also frustrates the typical strategy of a philosophical

reviewer. I could engage with Jeffrey's discussions of any of a dozen arguments. And these arguments are the main business of the book. But the arguments Jeffrey considers are not the through line of the book.

O.K. I can't resist commenting on one particular discussion. (It's what we philosophical reviewers do, and I'm especially interested in the argument in question.) In her final section, Jeffrey gives comparatively extensive attention to an argument by Kyla Ebels-Duggan about the conditions on what we might call "moral hope." If (as many have thought) "some actions . . . are so bad as to be absolutely morally prohibited" but there are also some outcomes "that are so bad we should do everything in our power to prevent them," then we could face dilemmas between the right and the good, dilemmas in which we must "perform an *action* that seems morally prohibited, or [permit] an *outcome* that also seems morally prohibited" (56, emphasis Jeffrey's). And that could lead to despair—certainly for anyone trapped in such a dilemma, and perhaps even for someone who recognizes this as a possibility.

(I wrote the preceding paragraph before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It has a visceral immediacy now, for anyone who has read the testimonies of emergency workers in Italy.)

The way Jeffrey initially describes these dilemmas, she seems to be thinking of them as formally irresolvable. If there are "absolutely prohibited actions" and "absolutely prohibited outcomes," and no preestablished harmony prevents them from coming into conflict, then one could find oneself in circumstances in which "one must do something . . . prohibited" (57). Nothing, in such circumstances, would count as doing the right thing. But Ebels-Duggan and other Kant-inspired theorists who introduce these concerns would regard this way of framing the issue as unsatisfactory. No Kantian would endorse the notion of a "prohibited outcome." (Nor should anyone, I think.) And if there are not literally "prohibited outcomes," then these are not irresolvable dilemmas. They are "merely" moral horrors. The moral thing to do is clear. But it has ghastly consequences.

The dilemma remains, though, even if it is not irresolvable; and after her first attempt to set up the dilemma, Jeffrey articulates it in less strict—but no less gripping—terms. "No one walks away from that kind of choice unmarred," she writes (57). Again, think of the choices faced by health-care workers in the face of disasters like Hurricane Katrina or a rising pandemic.

Assume I'm right about how these dilemmas should be understood. I'm not sure how the argument proceeds from there. Is the possibility of someday facing such a dilemma supposed to drive every reflective person to despair? Or is it that we all face such dilemmas, if we have the eyes to see, and so we all have grounds for despair? (Might someone rationally hope to be lucky enough never to face such a dilemma, and not despair preemptively?)

Jeffrey's most compelling formulations put the worry in terms of the deep uncertainty of general convergence (the "happy coincidence")

between right action and good consequences. This, naturally, is where thinkers like Ebels-Duggan (and Jeffrey, and I) turn to God. If one posits a God who providentially orders the world so that the righteous flourish—if only “in the end”—then righteousness is not undercut by despair. Then one can carry on in hope.

I have allowed myself to delve into this argument, one of perhaps (I should have counted) *fifty* in this slim book, partly because I find it intriguing and there were specific points I wanted to notice, partly because it highlights the inherent difficulty of Jeffrey’s enterprise. A book like this, if it is to be both slender and comprehensive, must often be telegraphic. And this was one of Jeffrey’s more extensive discussions.

But this argument, or its conclusion, also highlights the actual through line of the book, the argument about the comparative philosophical interest of thin and thick theisms (say that ten times, fast). It is this, if anything, that makes the book more than an intelligently arranged catalog of available views. Jeffrey’s overarching argument, as I noted early on, is a cumulative-case argument, meant to emerge from her separate discussions of the dozens of other arguments she considers. It remains only to say a bit more about the overarching argument.

Jeffrey defines “thin theism” in her opening pages as any theism that “claims no more about God than that God is the God of the Abrahamic traditions . . . or that God is the omniGod of perfect being theology” (2). This is a loose characterization, and Jeffrey knows it. That’s not a problem, though, because it’s not Jeffrey’s project to get clear on the lineaments of “thin theism” or, as she puts it later, “least-common-denominator . . . theism” and then evaluate this view. Though her talk of “thin theism” could lead some readers to suppose that she has a definite view in mind, or a cluster of views with shared elements, she’s not interested in defining the term and putting it to work. It would be truer to her project—if it were not awkward—to talk in exclusively scalar terms. Thinness and thickness are opposed directions on a scale, and her point can be restated thus: the thinner your theism—the less richly worked-out and potentially controversial your conception of God—the less likely that the existence of that God would make an important difference in stabilizing aspects of your metaethical views.

Consider again Ebels-Duggan’s argument about the conditions on moral hope. Hope for the happy coincidence would seem to be rational on some presuppositions but not on others. Does the premise that there is a maximally perfect being (specified no further) imply that right action and good consequences won’t come tragically apart, that the sufferings of the righteous will somehow be redeemed? It’s hard to see how. It could imply this only with the addition of multiple controversial premises.

Therein lies the worry some will feel, presented with Jeffrey’s argument. Aren’t there reasons for philosophers to stick to thinner theisms when doing philosophy of religion? The more specific the conception of God a philosopher works with, the less widespread agreement she can

expect about the correctness of that conception. If we take Jeffrey's advice, won't we be "creat[ing] even more silos within philosophy of religion" (65)? Jeffrey thinks not. If the danger with silos is that they isolate us from one another, how much more isolating to converse with religious others without owning up to what either of us really believe, outside the philosophy room? Interreligious understanding seems likelier to come from a fusion of horizons than from an attempt to say as little as possible.

I concur with Jeffrey about this almost entirely. Almost. Reading the closing pages of this closely argued book, I found myself thinking of C.S. Lewis's famous image of different (Christian) traditions as rooms in a boarding house. The "mere Christianity" of his title he likened to the main hall, off which the rooms open. "But it is in the rooms," he writes, "not the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals." Sage words. And yet: there was a point too in his writing a book titled *Mere Christianity*. As there might be a point in books and articles about "mere theism." If it can be clarifying and instructive for believers to explore the ways in which they are different, it can be equally clarifying and instructive for them to explore the ways in which they are the same.

Jeffrey has done her peers a service in writing this book, which must have been demanding to compose. It's not something everyone needs to read. But I don't think there's anything quite like it on the market. If you need what it offers, you'll be glad to have it on your shelf.

(Thanks to the students in Houghton College's spring philosophy colloquium—Anna Judd, Aaron Moore, Anna Nesemeier, Tyler Stetson, Elijah Tangenberg, Honus Wagner, and Josiah Wiedenheft—for reading and discussing Jeffrey's book, and a draft of this review, with me. Thanks to Kyla Ebels-Duggan for helpful discussion about her argument in "The Right, the Good, and the Threat of Despair.")

Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment, by John Pittard. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp xiii + 339. \$80 (hardcover).

KIRK LOUGHEED, The University of Johannesburg.

John Pittard's book, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment* marks a significant contribution to both epistemology and the philosophy of religion. The book is excellent and those working in these fields would do well to engage with it. The problem Pittard addresses is that of religious disagreement: Suppose Sally believes some religious proposition, say, that

