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Intrinsic value and love: three challenges for *God's Own Ethics*

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Abstract: **I advance three challenges for the view Murphy advances in *God's Own Ethics*. The first two challenges target Murphy's claim that God does not have requiring reasons to prevent the suffering of rational creatures. I develop two arguments against that position, one based on the intrinsic value of human beings, the other based on the intrinsic badness of the suffering of rational creatures. My third challenge targets Murphy's account of God's contingent love for humanity. I seek to raise doubts about whether Murphy's picture is one in which it is true to say that God loves all human beings.**

Introduction

Mark Murphy's *God's Own Ethics*[1] is a ground-breaking book that provides challenging arguments against some of the fundamental assumptions accepted by most contemporary participants in philosophical discussion of the problem of evil. Murphy contends that God has justifying but not requiring reasons to promote the well-being/perfection of rational creatures and consequently His permitting the suffering of rational creatures needs no justification at all. If that is correct, then, as Murphy explains, many prominent versions of the argument from evil fail. Murphy also contends that while there is nothing in the nature of the Anselmian being that entails that that being loves us, traditional Christianity teaches that God does in fact love us. In the final sections of his book, Murphy sketches an account of the nature of God's contingent love for us.

Here I advance three challenges for Murphy's view. The first two challenges target Murphy's claim that God does not have requiring reasons to prevent the suffering of rational creatures. I develop two arguments against that position, one based on the intrinsic value of human beings, the other based on the intrinsic badness of the suffering of rational creatures. My third challenge targets Murphy's account of God's contingent love for humanity. I seek to raise doubts about

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whether Murphy's picture is one in which it is true to say that God loves all human beings.

The intrinsic value of human beings

Murphy holds that all good things distinct from God – including human beings – possess only extrinsic or relational value rather than intrinsic value; there is no value that human beings possess 'solely on account of [their] intrinsic properties' (76 n. 7). Instead, human beings possess at most goodness 'by participation' (80) in virtue of standing in an appropriate relationship to God, the only entity that possesses intrinsic goodness. Consequently, 'creaturely goodness is a lesser *kind* of good' and 'all goodness is realized by the Anselmian being' (81; emphasis in original). On this view, all the goodness that there could ever be inheres in God, and when God creates, He at most spreads that goodness around, but no additional goodness comes into being. Murphy insists that the participatory goodness of creatures is agent-neutral goodness in the sense that it can ground reasons for action for all beings; that is part of the basis for his view that the Anselmian being has justifying (but not requiring) reasons to promote the existence and well-being/perfection of creatures (84).

I see two reasons to doubt the claim that no human being possesses any intrinsic value. First, the use of G. E. Moore's isolation test or Scott Davison's annihilation test suggests that at least some human beings do possess intrinsic value. To apply Moore's isolation test to something, one considers 'what value we should attach to [something], if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments' (Moore (1903), 91). Any value that a thing would have if it existed in complete isolation is presumably intrinsic value. To apply the annihilation test to something, one first imagines a given entity being completely annihilated 'so that no part of it exists at all' (Davison (2012), 35). Next, one considers whether a fully informed, properly functioning valuer would regard the annihilation of a given thing as the loss of something valuable for its own sake. If so, then the entity in question is intrinsically valuable. When I apply each of these tests to, say, Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr., I get the result that those persons possessed some intrinsic value.[2]

Second, Murphy holds that certain properties are 'unqualified good-making properties' in that they contribute to the intrinsic goodness of any being that instantiates them (10). Murphy also considers being powerful and being knowledgeable (among other properties) to be unqualified good-making properties. At least some unqualified good-making properties are also perfections; being powerful and being knowledgeable are examples. That a given property is a perfection entails at least that 'there is an extent beyond which it cannot be realized *in a more valuable way*' (20; emphasis in original). The Anselmian being possesses each perfection precisely to this value-maximizing degree – omnipotence, in the case of being powerful, and omniscience, in the case of being knowledgeable.

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However, most if not all human beings have some positive degree of power and knowledge, and so it appears that by Murphy's own lights such beings would have some non-zero degree of intrinsic goodness.

My point here is not merely that there appears to be some tension between Murphy's endorsement of power and knowledge as unqualified good-making properties and his later rejection of the view that any creatures possess any intrinsic value. Rather, I think the view that power and knowledge are unqualified good-making properties is independently plausible and constitutes good grounds for holding that human beings are intrinsically valuable.

Suppose, then, that human beings are intrinsically valuable. What are the implications of this for other aspects of Murphy's view? I think that Murphy's strategy for defusing the argument from evil can be challenged by combining the claim that human beings are intrinsically valuable with the following plausible moral principle:

> C: If S freely creates an intrinsically valuable being B, then S has a requiring reason not to allow B to suffer.

C describes what we might call 'a creator's obligation'. When one being freely brings into existence a second intrinsically valuable being, the first being thereby acquires certain responsibilities with respect to protecting the well-being of the second being. C allows that the creator of an intrinsically valuable being can permit that being to suffer if the creator has a compelling reason to do so, but if the creator permits such suffering without good reason, then the creator engages in practical irrationality – something that it is impossible for an Anselmian being to do. I do not claim that the creator is required to maximize the well-being of its intrinsically valuable creation, but it is required at least to see to it, as much as possible, that its intrinsically valuable creation does not suffer for no good reason. I also do not claim that there is an obligation to create intrinsically valuable beings; rather, the claim here is that having chosen to create such beings, the creator then has a certain responsibility to those beings.[3] To create intrinsically valuable beings freely is not merely to create rational opportunities for oneself; it is to impose rational constraints on oneself.

Murphy writes:

> Consider some evil, say, the pointless suffering of a deer in a forest fire. . . . The Anselmian being might fail to prevent this evil, *for no reason at all*, because acting so as to prevent that suffering provides the Anselmian being only justifying reasons for acting. (105; emphasis added)

Though Murphy speaks of the pointless suffering of a deer in this passage, he holds that the same is true of the pointless suffering of a child: the Anselmian being can permit the suffering of children for no particular reason because the Anselmian being has only justifying reasons to prevent such suffering. I think that this view

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is mistaken on the grounds that (i) human beings are intrinsically valuable (for the reasons explained above), (ii) God created human beings freely, and (iii) principle (C) is true. The Anselmian being may not be required to create beings that carry goodness within themselves, but once He does He cannot permit just anything to happen to them for no good reason – He acquires at least one 'duty of care' (193) towards them, the duty identified by principle (C). If that is right, then we should reject a key element of Murphy's strategy for dealing with various versions of the problem from evil, namely, that the Anselmian being does not have requiring reasons to prevent the suffering of human beings (see 70–75).

Murphy rightly characterizes the differences between human beings and the Anselmian being as 'massive' and 'radical' and writes that 'the Anselmian being . . . is not just one person among others' (55). Murphy points this out to highlight the fact that considerations that show that all human beings have reasons of a particular sort do not necessarily establish that the Anselmian being has reasons of that same sort. The point is well taken; however, my contention that the Anselmian being has requiring reasons not to permit us to suffer is not based on the claim that all human beings have requiring reasons not to permit other human beings to suffer. Instead, my argument is that it is precisely because the Anselmian being stands in a distinctive relationship to us – our creator – that the being has certain responsibilities towards us.

Here is another way of bringing out what I take to be some implausible implications of Murphy's view. Consider the following scenario. Suppose that the Anselmian being wants to produce a beautiful and complex visual display followed by a beautiful symphony. To create the beautiful visual display, the Anselmian being creates a fiery world of volcanoes spewing flame and lava in a bewildering variety of different colours. To add to the beauty of this world, the Anselmian being creates some human beings upon the surface of this fiery world; their physical appearance combines with the fiery display to enhance the overall beauty of the show. The Anselmian being foresees that these humans will have short and painful lives that will end in fiery deaths, but he does not intend their death or pain. Rather, their death and pain are foreseen but unintended consequences of their inclusion in the glorious fireworks of the fiery world. The Anselmian being further foresees that their screams of agony could be used as part of a beautiful symphony. The Anselmian being does not intend their screams to occur, but He foreknows that they will occur and He intends to produce the symphony and so makes use of the screams to produce the symphony. If I understand Murphy's view correctly, this is a scenario in which the Anselmian being does not intend evil and such a scenario is compatible with the Anselmian being's perfect goodness.[4]

I suggest that it is prima facie plausible that the Anselmian being has done something immoral in this scenario. I think that claims (i), (ii), and (iii) above constitute one plausible explanation of the wrongness of the Anselmian being's actions – but even if one rejects one or more of those claims, it seems to me

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that the scenario just described suggests that Murphy's view has gone wrong somewhere.

The intrinsic badness of pain

Murphy devotes considerable effort to making the case that the Anselmian being does not have requiring reasons to promote the perfection/well-being of rational creatures. Assume for the sake of argument that the Anslemian being has no such reasons. In this section I raise a concern about how Murphy employs that claim to defeat various versions of the problem of evil.

Murphy appears to move from (a) the Anselmian being has no requiring reasons to promote the perfection/well-being of rational creatures to (b) the Anselmian being has no requiring reasons to prevent the suffering of rational creatures. But I do not think that (b) follows from (a), because it seems that (a) is just one possible ground for (b) but is not (b)'s only possible ground. Another possible ground for (b) derives from the fact that the suffering of rational creatures is intrinsically evil.

I think that Moore's isolation test described earlier supports the position that the suffering of rational creatures is intrinsically evil; moreover, Murphy seems to accept this view himself (108). Might not, then, the intrinsic evil of such suffering itself provide the Anselmian being with a requiring reason to prevent the existence of such suffering? Recall Murphy's claim that God realizes all possible goodness; on this view, all goodness is divine goodness (81). Murphy also claims that 'it is part of the logic of intrinsic value' that adding an additional intrinsic good to the universe increases the total amount of goodness in the universe (80–81). It is plausible, then, that adding an intrinsic evil to the universe decreases the total amount of goodness in the universe. So, if all goodness is divine goodness, then adding an intrinsic evil to the universe decreases the total amount of divine goodness in the universe – or at least diminishes the extent to which divine goodness manifests itself in the universe (80–81). And it seems to me that the diminishment of the manifestation of its own goodness will be regarded as at least prima facie intolerable by the Anselmian being. Consequently, I propose the following line of reasoning for the claim that the Anselmian being has a requiring reason to prevent the suffering of rational creatures. The suffering of rational creatures is intrinsically bad; each instance of intrinsic badness in the universe diminishes the extent to which divine goodness manifests itself in the universe and the Anselmian being has a requiring reason to prevent the diminishing of the extent to which its own goodness manifests itself in the universe. Therefore, the Anselmian being has a requiring reason to prevent the suffering of rational creatures.

Is this love?

On Murphy's view, the Anselmian being has no compelling reason to create us in the first place and whether He creates us or not is entirely up to Him. Having

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created us, He is free to love us or ignore us entirely. However, according to traditional Christianity, the actual Anselmian being – the Christian God – has freely chosen to love us. According to Murphy's account of this love, the central aspects of God's love for humanity are the following:

> God has made covenants with us, and . . . God is faithful to those covenants. What these covenants make clear, on our side, is that God has an interest in our acting well, manifested both in God's reaffirming moral truths through the direction of divine positive law and in Scripture's affirming that God has made knowable through natural processes, or general revelation, what those norms are. . . . [C]oupled with God's willing for us our adherence to the moral law and action that may go beyond that moral law in strange and incomprehensible ways, there is an assurance given. . . . to all people . . . that those who will recognize Christ as Messiah – who acknowledge and subordinate themselves to Him . . . will have life, and have it abundantly. (188–189)

Is this love? It seems to me that the answer to that question depends on the broader context in which the covenants and assurances described by Murphy take place. Recall that on Murphy's view human beings have no intrinsic value and so by creating us God does not make the universe better overall; all the intrinsic goodness there is or ever could be already exists within God Himself. Relatedly, God is free to create us or not; and, indeed, He was free to create all of us that actually exist, or just some of us, or none of us at all. Add to this an element that Murphy does not explicitly endorse but that is part of traditional Christianity, namely the denial of universalism and the implication that a great many humans who actually exist fail to subordinate their wills to God's will and hence fail to attain the assurance that all will be well – as God knew they would. We are left, then, with a picture according to which God has freely chosen to create intrinsically worthless beings and offer them a deal that He foreknows many of them will fail to keep, all of whom will experience significant suffering and some of whom will experience enough suffering to outweigh any goods they experience – all without increasing the overall goodness of the universe by a single whit. Reflecting on this picture, I am tempted by the thought that for the majority of human beings, God's actions are best described not as loving but rather as a kind of cruel joke – or at least, as indifference. What can be said to support the claim that God loves those who are not saved and whose suffering outweighs the goods they experience? It is true, let us suppose, that they could have conformed their wills to God's – but God knew that they wouldn't prior to deciding to create them. So why bring them into existence at all, especially given that their presence in the universe contributes no additional goodness?

Conclusion

Murphy's book is ground-breaking in that it is the most extended and insightful examination of God's reasons for action of which I am aware, and it is important because it challenges some of the most basic assumptions typically made in discussions of the problem of evil. A theme of Murphy's book is that

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the reasons God has to prevent suffering are far less robust than is typically assumed. I have tried, to some extent, to defend the status quo regarding God's own ethics. But whatever the merits of my objections, Murphy's book is one that any philosopher interested in the problem of evil ought to read.

References

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Notes

1. Murphy (2017). All page numbers in parentheses in my text refer to this book.
2. Murphy is willing to consider the implications of the supposition that Michael Jordan is the greatest possible being (16).
3. Murphy considers a proposal along these lines (see 32–33, though I do not claim that the creator is required to love its intrinsically valuable creatures). In connection with that proposal, he considers the relationship between artists and their art, arguing that artists have no particular obligation to their work merely in virtue of having created it. But of course the creations in such cases cannot suffer.
4. In this scenario, the Anselmian being intends the visual display (G1) and foreknows but does not intend the evil E (including the painful screams) that will result (the evils that result are not among the success conditions of creating the beautiful visual display). Evil E results from the bringing about of G1. The Anselmian being also intends the beautiful symphony (G2) and makes use of (without intending) E in the bringing about of G2 (see 118).

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Enabling Ivan Karamazov: responding to Mark Murphy's *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*

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Abstract: ***God's Own Ethics*** **introduces a number of philosophical subfields into conversation with philosophy of religion and metaethics in an attempt to discern the ethics of God. While its conception of the divine being is itself controversial, I here take issue with the claim that the divine being described in** ***God's Own Ethics*** **would be one worthy of worship and allegiance. Specifically, I argue that a God**

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