

Book reviews

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Harriet Harris (ed.) *God, Goodness and Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011). Pp. xvii + 257. £19.99 (Pbk). ISBN 978 1 4094 2852 7.

The 2009 British Society for the Philosophy of Religion conference took as its theme ‘God and Morality’, and this collection draws together some of the papers presented on that occasion. This is the first volume in the newly established British Society for the Philosophy of Religion series, and it is to be hoped that it marks the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration between Ashgate and the Society.

The collection opens with a helpful expository essay by the editor, Harriet Harris, in which she surveys the volume’s contents and takes stock of some recurring themes. In the following essay, on ‘what’s the use of philosophy of religion?’, Victoria Harrison proposes that an ‘understanding of philosophy of religion appropriate for today should both emphasise the discipline’s relevance to problems generated in the non-academic world and address the excessive specialization characterizing it’ (p. 38). In Harrison’s view, meeting this aspiration will require philosophers of religion to take a new interest in other domains of philosophical inquiry, and to develop a deepened sensitivity to the concerns of non-western philosophical traditions, where these developments have the potential to be mutually supporting.

In his essay on ‘the source of goodness’, John Cottingham takes up the central concerns of the volume, and also Harrison’s plea for a closer engagement between philosophy of religion and philosophical ethics, by arguing that ‘some account is surely needed of *how* certain features of things are endowed not just with provisional or instrumental but with unconditional or categorical action-guiding force’. Cottingham notes that on a theistic scheme ‘those features we call good-making point us towards the true goal of our existence’, and accordingly they acquire a ‘normative force which commands our allegiance whether we like it or not, independently of our own contingent inclinations’ (p. 58). Cottingham does not represent this line of reflection, suitably expanded and refined, as a knock-down argument for theism. There are some, after all, who will choose to move in the opposite direction – from a commitment to a naturalist world-view to the

thought that there are no categorical norms. But his case does underwrite very directly the claim of the philosophy of religion to be concerned with Harrison's problems of 'life', by showing how theism may be vitally connected to one widely shared construal of the significance of human choices.

In the following essay, Timothy Chappell considers whether we can find in Plato's *Euthyphro* what philosophers of religion are wont to call the 'Euthyphro dilemma', and in brief he concludes that we cannot. He argues that

the dialogue's deepest moral is . . . that Plato's ethical theism is preferable to chaotic polytheism because it gives us the only possible context in which divine-command ethics can be sustained. For only if God is good can it be reasonable to hope that what God commands will converge with what is morally right. (p. 72)

A recurring theme of this essay is that Socrates represents himself as a devout recipient of divine commands, and that we ought to read his remarks (or Plato's remarks) on the role of inspiration and 'vision' in human life accordingly. In his essay on 'moral realism in the Hebrew Bible', Jaco Gericke argues for a somewhat similar thesis in relation to Hebraic ethical traditions. Gericke argues that a close reading of various Hebrew Bible texts points to the conclusion that 'moral goodness was . . . assumed to be something independent from the deity and with reference to which Yhwh could be called "good" (or not)' (p. 91). On this interpretation, as on the reading of Plato which Chappell proposes, 'the underlying moral epistemology assumed that humans needed good gods to tell them what the good life is all about' (p. 98).

In his essay, Anders Kraal asks: 'does divine simplicity solve the Euthyphro dilemma?' He argues that Plantinga's much-discussed objection to simplicity fails, because it 'requires that the conclusions of his arguments . . . can be obtained by means of first-order logic' (p. 104), when in fact they cannot. The juxtaposition of this essay with those of Chappell and Gericke, and their philosophically informed readings of ancient texts, is one measure of the range of argumentative styles represented in this volume.

There follow several essays on the theme of 'evolution and the grounds of morality'. Roger Scruton argues that the concepts of piety, the sacred, defilement, pollution, desecration, and so on, have all been 'important in mediating between the belief in God and the exercise of moral judgement' (p. 112); and in so far as contemporary moral philosophy is founded upon the idea of consent, he maintains, then it misses those features of our relations with other human beings which these concepts so helpfully map. 'Why is rape so much worse than spitting on someone?', Scruton asks. 'In what does the harm consist? Is it just that something is done to someone without her consent?' (p. 113). Scruton is surely right that the idea of consent and kindred notions are not enough for an understanding of our moral responses in such cases. He notes that an evolutionary psychological perspective will readily admit that concepts such as pollution and

piety are central to human life. But this perspective fails to reckon with the real significance of these concepts, he argues, because it 'has nothing to say about . . . the *deep intentionality* of the feelings that it purports to explain', since it considers these feelings simply as adaptations, and disregards their status as thoughts, and is therefore 'entirely neutral concerning their real justification and the ontological ground of the concepts used to express them' (p. 121).

In his essay on 'evolution and agapeistic ethics', Robin Attfield picks up some similar themes, and argues that an evolutionary perspective poses no threat to our conception of ourselves as moral agents, because it leaves open the possibility of 'non-familial, non-reciprocal altruism' (p. 128). The implications of evolutionary psychology for ethics are also the theme of Herman Philipse's essay. Philipse notes the suggestion that 'a basic moral proposition is true if and only if the moral code that would best serve the function of enabling society to meet its needs included or entailed the corresponding norm or standard' (p. 157). And following David Copp, he notes that this idea could be taken to imply that evolutionary processes will have a tendency to produce true moral beliefs. The implied argument is of course that true moral beliefs will have adaptive value, granted this conception of moral truth. Philipse registers some difficulties for this approach, but he also suggests that Copp's account, or something like it, offers the best prospect of securing the compatibility of meta-ethical realism and an evolutionary account of the content of our moral beliefs. However, this strategy raises a problem for theists, he suggests, because it implies that 'the truth-conditions of moral propositions are essentially linked to the needs of human societies' (p. 161); and from this it follows that God is not a moral agent, since God is 'unique in His kind, instead of being a social animal' (p. 161). And in that case, 'we can have no idea what God's moral standards are, if any', and accordingly we can have no idea of what sort of world God might create, so depriving the hypothesis of theism of any predictive power. Philipse presents this case only very briefly, at the close of his essay, and a fuller formulation would presumably need to address various responses. For example, it might be said that the divine nature is what secures the truth of the judgement that it is good that the needs of human societies should be met; so while God is not subject to moral norms (and while God is not a moral agent, to that extent), this is not to say that we 'have no idea' of God's evaluative standards. Or again, from a different vantage point, it might be said: if there are true moral propositions, then (whatever their truth conditions may be) God will know them, and as perfectly good be motivated to act upon them.

So far, I have been concerned with the contents of Part I of the volume, entitled 'Goodness, morality and transcendence'. Part II comprises five essays, which have as their theme 'Evil and the goodness of God'. In his essay on 'God, omniscience and understanding evil', Dan O'Brien notes a difficulty for the omni-property conception of God: if God is to be omniscient, then God must understand the sinful thoughts of creatures; but to understand those thoughts, God must take on

our point of view, and this suggests some imperfection in God. O'Brien draws this parallel from fictional experience: 'One talks of being polluted; one wishes one had not read or seen that – not because it gives one an outside perspective on something distasteful or immoral, but because it gives one the inside perspective' (p. 175). This argument need not suggest any incoherence in the concept of God, O'Brien notes, because to be divine it is enough to have 'the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence' (here quoting Yujin Nagasawa).

In his essay on 'what makes generosity sometimes unjust?', Nicholas Wolterstorff takes up the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Labourers in the Vineyard (Luke 15 and Matthew 20). He notes that if we follow Aristotle's account of distributive justice, then it would be natural to conclude that father and landowner behave unjustly, since in these stories there seems to be no 'morally relevant reason' for 'differentiating between the included and the excluded' (pp. 188–189). Wolterstorff sketches various scenarios where the Aristotelian principle (requiring as a condition of justice that there should be a morally relevant reason for any differentiation in the distribution of generosity) fails to apply. And he infers that father and landowner are not guilty of injustice – and that God is similarly innocent, in so far as God behaves as they do. Wolterstorff is surely right that the Aristotelian principle is vulnerable to a range of counterexamples. As he says, we can hardly suppose that 'volunteering to help out [in a soup kitchen, or retirement home, or whatever it may be] on one occasion [implies] that if one fails to help out in all relevantly similar situations, one is acting unjustly' (p. 190). But we might suppose that this truth is grounded in our specifically human mode of being: we cannot reasonably expect a human being to be able to identify all relevantly similar cases; and even if we did have this capacity, the attempt to order our generosity according to the Aristotelian principle might well have the undesirable outcome of making us much less generous. (If I am required to volunteer for any number of relevantly similar causes if I volunteer for the soup kitchen, as a condition of being just, then I may well decide not to volunteer for the soup kitchen!) So, given human beings' limited powers of thought and action, there is a clear rationale for setting aside the Aristotelian principle in the domain of inter-human generosity. But this rationale will not extend to God on any traditional reading of God's capacities. So more needs to be said, it seems, if we are to be confident that Wolterstorff's examples extend to the case of divine generosity.

There remain three essays. Ioanna-Maria Patsalidou argues that God's preservation of the damned in hell (a scenario she contrasts with their annihilation) may be inconsistent with the divine goodness. Vasil Gluchman reviews the thought of the Slovak Lutheran pastor Augustin Doležal (1737–1802) on the good which derives from original sin. And Alicja Gescinska considers the later, panentheistic thought of Max Scheler, arguing for its consistency with his earlier work.

The volume concludes with an 'afterword' by John Cottingham, the President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion at the time of the conference, where he notes the stimulus which may be provided to moral philosophy by various questions posed in the philosophy of religion. This volume makes a persuasive, engaging, and very varied case for the importance of this sort of exchange for both disciplines.

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James Kellenberger *Dying to Self and Detachment*. (Farnham: Ashgate 2013). Pp. 181. £50.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 1 4094 4390 2.

Self-abnegation is not a virtue that looms large in contemporary moral philosophy. One of the most influential ethical theorists of our time, Bernard Williams, has suggested that the chosen projects of the individual agent are the only ultimate ground of the requirement to act in certain ways. And Christine Korsgaard, starting from very different premises from Williams, has argued something similar – that one's own self-conception is the source of normativity. These self-oriented conceptions of ethics that have become so dominant in our time could not be further removed from the ideal of dying to self as the goal of human life – an ideal with deep roots in our Judaeo-Christian culture, and also found in somewhat different form in non-theistic religious outlooks such as Buddhism. Kellenberger's exploration of the ethical significance of this ideal is therefore a welcome reminder of an influential conception of how humans should live that has not received the attention it deserves in contemporary moral philosophy.

The approach taken in the book is partly historical and partly conceptual-analytic. Kellenberger begins with the concept of humility, which he describes as a 'polythetic' concept (one not defined by necessary and sufficient conditions for its use, but covering a range of cases linked by a network of overlapping similarities). There are various ways of being humble, by no means all of them to be understood in religious terms; but Kellenberger argues that religious humility is special. In the religious case, humility is radically opposed to self-concern, so that taking pride in one's humble behaviour is ruled out – a requirement that Kellenberger suggests does not necessarily obtain in all secular contexts.

Detachment (at least in the strong sense that connotes not mere aloofness or emotional distance, but actively striving to subdue the will and separate