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## Evil and the God of Abraham, Anselm, and Murphy

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**Abstract:** Mark Murphy's attempt to solve the problem of evil appeals to the hypothesis, which I call 'Murphy's hypothesis', that an Anselmian God only has justifying reasons and not requiring reasons to promote the well-being of Her sentient creatures. Given this hypothesis, the distribution of benefits and harms that we observe in the world is not unexpected on Anselmian theism. I argue that Murphy fails to solve the problem of evil for two reasons. First, he incorrectly equates the probability of the distribution of benefits and harms given theism with the probability of that distribution given theism *conjoined with Murphy's hypothesis*. Second, he fails to solve the evidential problem of immorality for Christian Anselmian theists and in fact his views make that problem significantly worse.

Mark Murphy has written an extraordinary book. In my opinion, *God's Own Ethics*<sup>1</sup> is one of the most important and carefully argued books in the philosophy of religion in the past decade and a very important contribution to the literature on perfect being theology and the problem of evil. I will attempt to show in this article, however, that Murphy does not solve the problem of evil, either for Anselmian theists in general or more specifically for Christian Anselmian theists.

### **Anselmian theism not otherwise specified**

Murphy appears to regard Humean arguments from evil as the biggest threat to Anselmian theism, for his focus is on whether certain serious alternative hypotheses to Anselmian theism account for what Hume referred to as the 'strange mixture of goods and ills' that we observe in the world much better than Anselmian theism does. 'Goods', in this context, are restricted to things that benefit humans and other sentient creatures on Earth while ills or evils are things that harm those beings. Arguably, a variety of things can directly benefit or harm sentient beings in the sense of non-instrumentally making their lives better or worse for them. For starters, pleasures (conscious experiences that feel

good) increase well-being, at least other factors held equal, while pains (experiences that feel bad) decrease it. Also, in the case of human beings and other animals of sufficient psychological complexity, how good a life is for the being living it arguably depends on more than just how much pleasure and how little pain is felt. In other words, pleasures and pains are not the only things that are *ultimately* good or bad for conscious beings. For example, romantic love, friendship, and other good social relationships seem to make life better, while having enemies or being rejected by a love interest makes it worse, quite apart from how much pleasure or pain results from such relationships. In addition, achievement<sup>2</sup> or the failure to achieve (in spite of trying) and having control over one's own destiny (that is, autonomy) or lacking such control (heteronomy) are also plausibly thought to benefit or harm people directly.

Taking into account certain crucial background knowledge about our world, what we know about these various benefits and harms is much (that is, many times) less probable under the hypothesis that there exists a morally perfect God than under alternative hypotheses like naturalism or David Hume's hypothesis of indifference. Murphy grants something like this, so I won't bother to argue for it here. He claims, however, that an Anselmian God, even a Christian one, need not be morally perfect. Instead, such a God has only *justifying* reasons to promote the well-being of Her sentient creatures, not *requiring* reasons let alone decisive ones. Call this last sentence 'Murphy's hypothesis'. This hypothesis is the key to his attempt to solve the evidential problem of evil for Anselmian theists. *Given Murphy's hypothesis*, what we know about the goods and evils mentioned above is no more unexpected on the assumption that Anselmian theism is true than it is on the assumption that naturalism, for example, is true. He concludes that the strongest evidential arguments from evil fail.

One important problem with this argument is the part in which Murphy's hypothesis is taken to be a 'given'. Of course, Murphy does argue in great detail for the truth of Murphy's hypothesis, but his arguments depend for their success on a number of very controversial ethical, metaethical, and metaphysical assumptions. Thus, Murphy's hypothesis is far from certain even on the assumption that Anselmian theism is true. Therefore, even if Murphy has shown that what we know about suffering is not antecedently more probable on, say, naturalism than on Anselmian theism *conjoined with Murphy's hypothesis*, he has not shown that what we know about suffering is not antecedently more probable or even much more probable on naturalism than on Anselmian theism, and thus he has not shown that the problem of evil is solved for Anselmian theists not otherwise specified.

### **Christian Anselmian theism**

Suppose, however, that Murphy could overcome this problem. Suppose, for example, that none of the objections to Murphy's hypothesis (e.g. the objection that creators have special obligations to promote the well-being of their creatures)

have any force at all, and that Murphy's arguments are unusually conclusive for philosophical arguments about difficult issues like this. Even supposing all this, Murphy's book still falls short of solving the problem of evil, at least for Christian Anselmian theists. The reason it falls short is that the problem of suffering, the problem of the various ways in which human beings and other sentient animals are harmed or made worse off, is only one part of the problem of evil. Another part is the problem of immorality or vice.

Although my objection here doesn't ultimately depend on this, I submit that virtue and vice do not bear the same relationship to well-being that pleasure and pain or for that matter love and hate or autonomy and heteronomy do. Moral virtue, when beneficial, is only indirectly or instrumentally beneficial to the virtuous, and moral vice, when harmful, is only indirectly or instrumentally harmful to the vicious. Still, virtue and vice do add positive or negative value *to* a life (as opposed to *for* the being living that life)<sup>3</sup> and so, while they are part of the 'data of good and evil' that potentially generate evidential problems for Christian theists, the problems they generate need not be based on considerations of suffering or well-being. I will argue in the next section of this article that this part of the problem remains in full force when the argument from evil is formulated as an argument against Christian Anselmian theism as Murphy understands it. Then, in the final section, I will go even further, arguing that Murphy's views actually make the problem of immorality for Christian Anselmian theists more difficult to solve.

In order to appreciate these arguments, however, it is important to be clear about what, according to Murphy, the adjective 'Christian' adds to Anselmian theism. If Anselmianism is the view that there exists a perfect being (in Anselm's sense as interpreted and developed by Murphy), then, following Murphy's lead (177) we can define 'Anselmian theism' as the view that there exists a God, where 'God' is defined semi-stipulatively as a perfect being that is worthy, not just of our worship, but also of our allegiance. According to Murphy, a being could be perfect in the Anselmian sense and not be God so defined, because, while an Anselmian or perfect being is necessarily worthy of worship, such a being is not necessarily worthy of allegiance. Thus, Anselmianism could be true even if Anselmian theism is not. *Christian Anselmian theism*, which I will call 'CAT' for short, is the view that there exists a God in the sense just semi-stipulated that is contingently worthy of allegiance in a way that fits well with the broad outlines of Christian theology, including the doctrine that God loves us.

And which way is that? At least part of Murphy's answer to this question can be found in this passage:

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. . . . But coupled with God's *willing* for us our adherence to the moral law . . . , there is an assurance given. . . . The New Testament assurance is . . . widely extended, to all people, and it is expressed in the assurance that those who will recognize Christ as Messiah – who acknowledge and subordinate themselves to Him – will have life, and have it abundantly. (188–189; my italics)

Erik Wielenberg argues in his contribution to this symposium that this conception of God's love is impoverished. Another way of describing my point in the next section is that, whatever the merits of Wielenberg's objection, Murphy's conception of God's love or of what makes God worthy of allegiance is rich enough to generate a serious evidential problem of immorality for Christian Anselmian theists.

### **The problem of immorality**

Some philosophers believe that free will solves the problem of immorality. On the contrary, when one looks at more than just the general fact that immorality exists and takes into account that even a will that is free can be influenced, it quickly becomes clear that, even assuming that we have libertarian free will, the pattern of moral goodness and moral badness among human beings is much more to be expected given hypotheses like naturalism than given CAT. I should emphasize that the issue here is whether a pattern of behaviour or a pattern of dispositions to behave in certain ways is, in light of the moral properties of such behaviour or dispositions, more to be expected on naturalism or on CAT. Whether morality itself (or normativity or moral obligations or moral principles) needs to be grounded metaphysically and whether CAT but not naturalism can provide such grounding is a completely different issue (but one that will be briefly addressed in the section 'The varieties of Anselmianism').

Notice for starters that we are dealing with mixed phenomena. Human beings are responsible for acts of great kindness, for acts of horrific cruelty, and for everything in between. For every human being who possesses a virtue (like benevolence or honesty or justice), there is another who possesses a corresponding vice (like malevolence or dishonesty or injustice). What sense can we make of all this? Focusing on the big picture, what stands out is that human beings are basically self-centred: while certain special circumstances can produce powerful motivations to act for the good of others, in most contexts our tendency to act in ways that promote our own interests is stronger. This promotes the biological goals of temporary survival and reproduction, and can easily be explained in terms of the operation of *unguided* natural selection (especially survival selection<sup>4</sup>). Like some other animals, however, human beings will at times act voluntarily in ways that promote the interests of others. Indeed, sometimes such 'prosocial behaviour' (as psychologists like to call it) is altruistic, not just in the narrow technical sense that it involves a cost to the subject's own interests, but also in the morally more significant sense that the subject is aware of that cost and is

motivated to act by feelings of empathy or by a genuine concern for the interests of those benefited.

Charles Darwin was unable to offer any fully convincing explanation of how altruism of any sort evolved. Thanks to the discovery of genes, however, we now have very plausible explanations of some forms of altruism. Consider, for example, altruistic acts that benefit one's kin. Because I share as many as half my genes with my kin, characteristics like self-centredness that help me survive and reproduce are not the only sorts of characteristics that can increase the likelihood that my genes will be passed down to future generations; characteristics like caring about my family members, which promote their survival and reproduction rather than my own, will also work. Thus, Darwin's theory of natural selection, when combined with naturalism and enriched by genetics, can account for kin altruism and the various natural virtues that produce it.

Altruism directed towards non-kin is tougher though by no means impossible to explain. Much non-kin altruism is a form of what psychologists call 'reciprocal altruism' (by 'scratching your back', I benefit when you reciprocate), for which a variety of plausible Darwinian explanations have been offered. Reciprocal altruism, however, does not explain the vast *scale* of non-kin altruism that we find in humans. Darwin thought that natural selection could operate at the group level and that groups whose members cooperated would have an advantage over groups whose members were more self-centred. In recent years some detailed explanations of how exactly this sort of selection could work have been proposed, and they offer an account of why humans cooperate so frequently, and in such complex ways, with such large numbers of people to whom they are not related.<sup>5</sup>

Notice that, whatever its evolutionary origins, non-kin altruism is much weaker in most humans than kin altruism as well as more frequently absent altogether, and this is not surprising on the theory of (unguided) natural selection. Notice too that it is typically very limited in its scope. The less like Smith Snake is, the less likely it is that Smith will be concerned about Snake's welfare. If, as Darwin thought, kin altruism is the basis for other sorts of altruism, then once again this should not be surprising. Furthermore, it is clearly to be expected on Darwin's theory that universal pure altruism, that is, the tendency to sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of the interests of any sentient being, no matter how different from oneself that being is and no matter how unlikely that being is to reciprocate, is rare in humans and usually weak in those humans that have it. Having a strong dose of this characteristic would clearly not (in the vast majority of circumstances) be advantageous in the struggle to survive. So its rarity, while unfortunate, is easily explained (notice: 'explained' - not 'justified') by the theory of natural selection when it is combined with naturalism. On the whole, then, the mixture of a basic self-centredness, with limited altruistic tendencies, can be explained quite plausibly by naturalism with the help of a contemporary version of Darwin's theory.

For the Christian Anselmian theist, however, Darwin's theory must be interpreted as a theory of guided natural selection, with the guiding done by a creator who wants human beings to obey the moral law. Such a theory fails to explain why such a creator fails so miserably to accomplish Her goals. The pattern of virtue and vice we see cannot just be chalked up to unfettered free will. If God used natural selection to design us, then that God designed us in such a way that moral failure is virtually guaranteed. Further, very little about our nature or circumstances even hints at any serious effort on the part of an omnipotent and omniscient being to train us morally or to guide us spiritually. On the contrary, a wide variety of genetic and environmental circumstances together with much moral ignorance make us predictably worse than we could be. This a far cry from what one would expect from a God who, to quote Murphy, 'has an interest in our acting well' and who 'has made knowable through natural processes, or general revelation, what [the moral truths] are' (188).

Psychopathy is an excellent example of just how indifferent nature or the creator appears to be when it comes to our moral development. This condition, which is characterized by (among other things) a lack of guilt and remorse, and a profound lack of empathy for the feelings of others, is thought to be caused in large part by one's genes, although environment plays some role. In any case, bad choices do not cause one to be a psychopath; instead, being a psychopath causes one to make bad choices. Further, although there is disagreement about its prevalence, the condition is not nearly as rare as most people think and is especially common, as one might expect, in prison populations. On naturalism, psychopathy is just another random variation. On CAT, we must suppose that a perfectly powerful and wise God who wants all human beings to follow the moral law is ultimately responsible for psychopathy, even if She didn't intend it to exist.

To sum up, when one looks at the overall pattern of virtue and vice in the world, one can see that the mixed phenomena we observe strongly favour naturalism over Christian Anselmian theism, even if God is not, as Murphy thinks, constrained by moral norms. But matters are even worse than that for Murphy. As I will show in the next section, the views he defends in his book actually exacerbate this evidential problem of immorality for the Christian Anselmian theist by undermining the most promising strategy for solving it.

### **The varieties of Anselmianism**

This additional problem for Murphy arises because his views imply that CAT must compete, not just with hypotheses like naturalism or the hypothesis of indifference, but also with other versions of Anselmianism. Recall that 'Anselmianism' is the view that a perfect being exists. Recall also that, according to Murphy, such a being might not be God in the sense specified earlier because such a being might make choices incompatible with worthiness of allegiance; and even if Anselmian *theism* is true, it doesn't follow that God would

be worthy of allegiance in a way compatible with Christian theology. Thus, a variety of Anselmianisms, both Christian and non-Christian, theistic and non-theistic, compete for probability space with naturalism, deism, pantheism, panentheism, axiarchism, and so on.

This is important because the most promising theistic response to existing Humean arguments from evil, at least in my opinion, is to attempt to show that, even if the pattern of good and evil in the world is better accounted for by alternative hypotheses like naturalism, there are many other phenomena that are better accounted for by theism. But such a response may not be available to the Christian Anselmian theist when the competing hypothesis is another version of Anselmianism. Consider, for example, a version of Anselmianism according to which the perfect deity's creative activity is motivated exclusively by aesthetic concerns. While such a being would want a beautiful universe, perhaps the best metaphor here is not that of a cosmic artist, but instead that of a cosmic playwright: an *author* of nature who wants above all to write an interesting story.

As everyone knows, good stories never begin with the line 'and they lived happily ever after', and that line is the last line of any story that contains it, so this creator would not seek the well-being of his creatures. Further, containing such a line is hardly necessary for a story to be good. So this being may not interact at all with his creatures, and will not make covenants with them, which nicely explains divine hiddenness in the sense of there being no *clear* revelation. Instead, if what we might call 'aesthetic Anselmian deism' is true, then it may very well be true that, 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women *merely* players' (emphasis added). In any case, aesthetic Anselmian deism makes 'predictions' about the distribution of virtue and vice in the world that are very different from the ones made by CAT. After all, what makes a good story good is often some intense struggle between good and evil, and many good stories contain a battle between good and evil. This suggests, though obviously much more needs to be said, that the observed mixture of virtue and vice in our world strongly favours aesthetic Anselmian deism over Christian Anselmian theism.

Notice, however, that, given the views Murphy defends in his book, natural theology offers no help in offsetting this evidence. It is difficult, for example, to see how he could claim that one of these hypotheses is intrinsically more probable than the other. Richard Swinburne would make that claim on the grounds that aesthetic Anselmian deism, unlike Christian Anselmian theism, must posit a bad desire to account for why the deity does not do what is morally best. For Swinburne, perfect rationality and moral perfection follow from omniscience and perfect freedom and refer to one and the same property.<sup>6</sup> Murphy, of course, cannot make that claim. An Anselmian being can freely and rationally choose from a whole host of justifying reasons for action. Such a being might or might not promote the well-being of his creatures. He might or might not

choose to love his creatures. He might or might not choose to promote aesthetic goals. None of these choices is intrinsically more likely than any other.

So what about extrinsic evidence? It's hard to think of a plausible challenge to aesthetic Anselmian deism based on such evidence. In contrast to naturalism, aesthetic Anselmian deism generates no worries about grounding objective values. And none of the other evidence usually taken to favour theism over competing hypotheses like naturalism seems to be helpful to the Christian Anselmian theist, because that evidence is no less expected on aesthetic Anselmian deism. Certainly, a deity interested in good narrative would want a world that is complex and yet ordered, that contains beauty, consciousness, intelligence, and moral agency, as well as an ample amount of both virtue and vice. But what about libertarian free will? If one ignores all of the immorality and suffering that results from it, its existence, the Christian Anselmian theist might claim, is much more expected on CAT than on aesthetic Anselmian deism. There are two problems with this claim, however. One is that, unless one starts from the truth of theism, there seems to be little good reason to believe that we actually have such freedom. Second, even if we have (evidence for) libertarian free will, it is not difficult to construct an aesthetic de-odicy to account for it. For example, if open theists are right that not even an omniscient being can know with certainty what free choices will be made in the future, then an aesthetic Anselmian deity might very well create libertarian free will and add other sorts of indeterminacy to the world in order to add genuine surprises to Her story. Who, after all, wants a completely predictable story? Alternatively, what might be important for the story is only that the characters think they have free will, not that they really have it.

While much more could be said about the specific version of non-theistic Anselmianism that I chose to discuss in this article, the bottom line is that Murphy's book may have opened up a Pandora's box of serious Anselmian alternatives to Christian Anselmian theism that, together with the usual alternatives used in Humean arguments from evil, compete very successfully for a very limited amount of probability space (limited, that is, relative to the total number of serious alternatives). It seems highly unlikely that, when all is said and done, Christian Anselmian theism can command more than half of that space, let alone the even larger portion of that space that would be needed to justify *belief*. This is one of the reasons why Murphy's book is, in my estimation, so important.

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### Notes

1. Murphy (2017). All page numbers in parentheses in my text refer to this book.
2. By 'achievement' I mean the completion of some meaningful project requiring courage, skill, or effort.
3. I owe this distinction to Mark Bernstein (1998).
4. Natural selection involves the selection of traits that make an organism more likely to reproduce. Survival selection occurs when the selected trait makes an organism more likely to reproduce because it makes that organism more likely to survive. Thus, survival selection is one type of natural selection, but there are other types as well. For example, sexual selection occurs when the selected trait makes an organism more likely to reproduce, not because it makes an organism more likely to survive, but because it makes it more likely to attract a mate assuming that it does survive.
5. See, for example, Sober & Wilson (1998).
6. See Swinburne's (2004, 96–109) discussion of the intrinsic probability and more specifically the simplicity of theism.

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## Replies to Wielenberg, Irwin, and Draper

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**Abstract:** In this symposium on *God's Own Ethics*, Erik Wielenberg, Kristen Irwin, and Paul Draper raise important criticisms of the arguments of that book. I respond to these criticisms.

I am very grateful to Erik Wielenberg, Kristen Irwin, and Paul Draper for engaging with the arguments of *God's Own Ethics*.<sup>1</sup> I respond to them in turn.

### Reply to Wielenberg

Wielenberg presses three points: one concerning the plausibility of the denial that humans have intrinsic value, one concerning the intrinsic disvalue of suffering, and one concerning whether God, as I have characterized God, loves us. As part of his discussion of the intrinsic disvalue of pain, he describes a horrific state of affairs the possibility of which is entailed, he claims, by my account of the Anselmian being's ethics. This case raises interesting issues that merit a separate discussion.

(1) Wielenberg disputes my denial that humans have intrinsic value. The notion that humans have intrinsic value – where to have such value is, recall, to have