

Editorial

God and Ethics

David Baggett

Department of Philosophy, School of Christian Thought Apologetics, Houston Christian University, Houston, TX 77074, USA; dbaggett@hbu.edu

This unique and rich volume is the culmination of a Special Issue of *Religions* with a focus on “God and Ethics”, a topic both rich with historical significance and of special contemporary importance in light of the recent resurgence of interest in this branch of natural and philosophical theology, philosophy of religion, and religious epistemology. Suggested themes for the Special Issue include whether or not the evidence furnished by various aspects of ethics points in the direction of God and, if so, in what fashion; discussions of obstacles in the way of theistic ethics; and challenges in making the best sense of ethics apart from theism.

It was suggested in the original call for papers that the nature of the adduced moral evidence might cover (but was not limited to) intrinsic human value, binding moral obligations, moral knowledge, moral transformation, the category of evil, issues associated with reconciling moral reasoning and prudential reasoning, and the historical discussion of moral atheology or the moral argument. Matters of the roles of reason and emotion in moral epistemology, the nature of potential dependence relations of morality on God, and what a sufficiently robust moral theology looks like are all topics for investigation that are rife with potential.

The ten contributions that passed muster by surviving peer review did not disappoint, and they now comprise this collection, making for an exciting contribution to the literature. We are deeply grateful to all the excellent contributors and all the good folks at *Religions* for everything they did to make this volume possible.

William Lane Craig starts with his article entitled “Is God’s Moral Perfection Reducible to His Love”? Defenders of the *identity thesis* maintain that God’s moral perfection is reducible to and identical to God’s love, but Craig argues that this thesis overlooks the fact that, biblically, God’s righteousness comprises both God’s love and justice. Moreover, Craig argues that divine justice is, in some significant measure, retributive in nature. This is especially evident in God’s eschatological punishment of the wicked, which can only be justified on retributive grounds. Such a retributive punishment cannot be attributed to love but is the just desert of the wicked.

Kevin Kinghorn replies directly to Craig’s piece with an article of his own: “God’s Moral Perfection as His Beneficent Love. Comment on Craig (2023). Is God’s Moral Perfection Reducible to His Love?” Craig had insisted that Kinghorn was wrong in reducing God’s moral goodness to his beneficent aim of drawing all people to himself. For Craig, God’s moral goodness, best conceived in terms of righteousness, must also include God’s retributive justice toward the wicked, who deserve the punishment they receive. Kinghorn’s response is that Craig’s argument rests on two assumptions about value, neither of which, he argues, Christian theists have good reason to affirm.

After that, we shift gears and devote several chapters to works of critical scrutiny by secular thinkers, starting with J. P. Moreland’s “A Critical Assessment of Shafer-Landau’s Ethical Non-Naturalism”. Moreland first specifies the nature of two versions of naturalism and argues that one is embraced ubiquitously—more importantly, should be embraced—by contemporary naturalists. He does so because, if he is right about this, there will be a significant burden of proof for Shafer-Landau to meet. In Moreland’s view, that burden



Citation: Baggett, David. 2023. God and Ethics. *Religions* 14: 1290. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101290>

Received: 28 September 2023

Accepted: 6 October 2023

Published: 13 October 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

is strong enough to justify the claim that a critic's epistemic task is merely to provide undercutting defeaters for Shafer-Landau's position and not to proffer rebutting defeaters, although Moreland attempts to supply both. After presenting a crucial characterization of contemporary naturalism followed by a critique of naturalist emergent properties, Moreland states and critiques Shafer-Landau's ontology and does the same for his epistemology. Both are evaluated with a particular focus on their plausibility to support Shafer-Landau's ethical non-naturalism.

Then, this is followed by Adam Lloyd Johnson's "Is It Morally Permissible for Some People to Rape and Murder? Responding to Erik Wielenberg's Argument that Divine Command Theory Fails to Explain How Psychopaths Have Moral Obligations". Atheist moral philosopher Wielenberg recently argued that Divine Command Theory is implausible as an explanation of objective morality because it fails to explain how psychopaths have moral obligations. In this chapter, Johnson explains that everyone agrees the consciences of psychopaths do not work as they should, but there is disagreement among experts as to whether (a) the consciences of psychopaths *do not* inform them of right and wrong or (b) the consciences of psychopaths *do* inform them of these things but merely do not generate the appropriate moral emotions.

Johnson argues that, based on psychological research, a strong case can be made for (b), and thus, under DCT, psychopaths do have moral obligations because their consciences inform them of what is right from wrong and that they should do what is right. He also argues that even if (a) is true, God can and does make psychopaths aware of what is right and wrong and that they should do what is right using other means such as rationality, society, parents, culture, direct verbal commands, etc. So, even if (a) is true, psychopaths still have moral obligations under DCT because they do know right from wrong, and they should do what is right. Lastly, Johnson turns the tables on Wielenberg and points out that his theory is even worse than DCT when it comes to providing an explanation for the moral rights and obligations of psychopaths.

Christopher R. Pruett extends this discussion of Wielenberg and the issues of psychopathy in his piece called "Divine Command Theory, Robust Normative Realism, and the Argument from Psychopathy: A Reply to Erik Wielenberg". Again, Wielenberg's fascinating *argument from psychopathy* from moral psychology against Divine Command Theory (DCT) focuses on the pathology known as psychopathy—a perennial interest for those concerned with abnormal and moral psychology. The strength of the argument is that it forces the Divine Command Theorist to maintain that there are some human beings who have no moral obligations yet still do evil actions. This, he argues, is an implausible thesis. Therefore, DCT is false. In this chapter, Pruett defends DCT and argues that there is good reason to be neutral or skeptical with regard to whether psychopaths have moral obligations and, to the degree that they do, whether they are able to grasp morality in a way consistent with DCT. Furthermore, if the argument does present a serious problem for DCT, then it does so for Wielenberg's own view, Robust Normative Realism (RNR), just as much as for DCT.

In "Theological Utilitarianism, Supervenience, and Intrinsic Value", Matthew Alexander Flannagan criticizes a different aspect of Wielenberg's work, namely the notion that robust realism can account for the "common-sense moral belief" that "some things distinct from God are intrinsically good". In contrast, Wielenberg argues that theological stateism cannot account for this belief. Hence, robust realism has a theoretical advantage over all forms of theological stateism. Flannagan replies by pointing out that Wielenberg distinguishes between R- and D-supervenience. The coherence of Wielenberg's robust realism depends on this distinction. Flannagan argues that this distinction undermines Shafer-Landau's critique of theological stateism by making three points. First, once we utilize the distinction between R- and D-supervenience, Wielenberg's argument for the incompatibility of theological stateism and intrinsic value fails. Second, theological stateism is compatible with intrinsic value. A historical example of theological utilitarianism, expounded by thinkers George Berkeley and William Paley, shows that someone can accept

that moral properties simultaneously R-supervene on God's will and D-supervene on the natural properties of actions. Third, robust realism and theological stateism are in the same boat regarding intrinsic value once we distinguish between R- and D-supervenience.

Next, in "The Secular Moral Project and the Moral Argument for God: A Brief Synopsis History", Dale Eugene Kratt provides an overview of the history of what he calls the secular moral project by providing a synopsis of the history of the moral argument for God's existence and the various historical processes that have contributed to the secularization of ethics. Kratt argues that three key thinkers propelled the secular moral project forward from the middle of the 19th century to the 20th: John Stuart Mill, whose ethical thinking in *Utilitarianism* served as the background to all late 19th century secular ethical thinking; Henry Sidgwick, who, in the *Methods*, indisputably established the secular autonomy of ethics as a distinctive discipline (metaethics); and G. E. Moore, whose work, *Principia Ethica*, stood at the forefront of virtually all secular metaethical debates concerning naturalism and non-naturalism in the first half of the 20th century. Although secular metaethics continues to be the dominant ethical view of the academy, it is shown that theistic metaethics is a strong reemerging position in the early 21st century.

In "Might Beauty Bolster the Moral Argument for God?" David Baggett discusses the moral argument from a different angle. John Hare argues that Kant, in his *Third Critique*, offers an aesthetic argument for God's existence that shares premises with his famous moral argument. Karl Ameriks demurs, expressing skepticism that this is so. In this chapter, Baggett stakes out an intermediate position, arguing that the resources of Kant provide ingredients for an aesthetic argument but one that is distinctly less than a transcendental argument for God or an entailment relation. Regardless of whether the argument is best thought of as abductive in nature, a C-inductive argument, or a Pascalian natural sign, prospects for its effective formulation are strong. And such an argument, for its resonances with the moral argument(s), can work well in tandem with it (them), a fact not surprising at all if Kant was right that beauty—in accordance with an ancient Greek tradition—exists in close organic relation to the good. More generally, Baggett argues that the sea change in Kant's studies over the last decade or so should help us see that Kant is an ally, rather than foe, to aesthetic theodiscists.

In the penultimate chapter, Martin Jakobsen's "A Christological Critique of Divine Command Theory" revisits DCT by presenting a theological critique of Divine Command Theory. First, he argues that this theory does not qualify as a Christian moral theory because it lacks connections to central parts of Christian theology, such as Christology. This does not imply that the theory is wrong, nor that it is inconsistent with Christianity, only that it is not Christian as such. Second, he argues that DCT does not fit well with the New Testament's vision of the moral life in which conforming to the image of Christ has precedence over adherence to the law. This argument, he argues, implies that the Christian ethicist should look elsewhere for a metaethical theory. He instead argues in favor of a moral theory of imitation, in which the moral life consists of imitating God, the prime exemplar of goodness, which is made possible via an imitation of Christ.

Finally, Brandon Rickabaugh's chapter follows: "Normative Reasons, Epistemic Autonomy, and Accountability to God". According to many, human autonomy is necessary for moral action and yet incompatible with being morally accountable to God's divine commands. By issuing commands that ground normative facts, God demands our accountability without understanding our normative reasons for moral action, which vitiates human autonomy. Rickabaugh calls this the *Autonomy Objection to Theism* (AOT) and argues that there is an unexplored connection between models of normative reason and AOT and that any plausible AOT must be stated in terms of an adequate model of normative reason. There are two broad metaethical categories for models of normative reason: anti-realist and realist views. He defends the thesis that both anti-realism and realism about normative reasons fail to support AOT using a dilemma. If the AOT defender adopts anti-realism for normative reasons (subjectivism and constructivism), AOT loses its force. However, if the AOT defender adopts moral realism, they face the same problem as the theist, as normative

fact constrains autonomy. Consequently, AOT is a problem for all moral realists, including non-theists, such as Russ Shafer-Landau, David Enoch, and Erik Wielenberg, among others.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.