

**Mark C. Murphy. *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*.
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In philosophical and theological reflection on the nature of God in the analytic tradition over the last 50 years, topics such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, God's relationship to time, divine simplicity, and others have received a good bit of attention. But divine holiness hasn't. Mark Murphy thinks that's a serious lacuna; he argues in *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* that holiness is "central to knowing and properly responding to God" (1) and that thinking about divine motivation in terms of holiness provides insight into what God would or could do, impacting our thinking about evil, hiddenness, incarnation, atonement, and other key theological concepts. I won't try to summarize all the content of the book. Instead, I will summarize Murphy's account of divine holiness and his defense of the holiness framework as superior to the morality and love frameworks for understanding divine motivation (I take these sections to be the heart of the book). Then I will briefly summarize his application of the holiness framework of divine action to the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness. I will end by raising a couple of concerns I have with Murphy's project.

1. Murphy on Divine Holiness

Murphy begins in Chapter 1 by arguing against various accounts of divine holiness that have been given. For example, holiness is not maximal separateness; this would imply that the world, as separate from God, is equally holy. Neither is holiness moral goodness, since it's possible that God is not constrained by any moral standards, yet God would still be holy; also, understanding divine holiness in relation to moral goodness would only apply to one aspect of God, but holiness should apply to all aspects of who God is.

Murphy gives his analysis of "Primary Holiness" in Chapter 2. His account of the concept of holiness draws on Rudolf Otto's phenomenology of holiness.¹ Murphy focuses on Otto's account of the dual aspect of the experience of the holy ("numinous" experience). First, there's the *fascinans* aspect. The holy "captivates one's attention and draws one powerfully in its direction" (26) – the holy is desirable. Second, there's the *tremendum* aspect. We feel the need to draw back from what is holy. This aversion is not primarily because of fear; "the primary repulsion response in holiness experience is a sense of being profoundly *out-of-place*" (28) because we judge that we are unfit to be in the presence of the holy being. What we desire,

¹ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

and what we recognize as unfitting, is “unity with the holy being” (31). From this Murphy explains his concept of holiness; to be holy is “to exhibit those features that *make it appropriate* for us to have the normative responses characteristic of the holiness experience” (34) – the *fascinans* and *tremendum* responses. He analyzes the desirability of the holy in terms of what is good for us. He analyzes the recognition of unfitness as paradigmatically caused by things like having a bad character, but stresses that we shouldn’t think of moral failures as “exclusively what constitutes one’s unfitness to be [in] the presence of the holy” (41). Murphy gives the analogy of an undergraduate at an academic workshop led by a preeminent scholar with the participants all being top-notch academics. In an experience like this, “[t]here is a sense of shame—or something very like it—here, of thinking of oneself as inadequate and not belonging among them, that is not a matter of moral shame at all” (41). This sets up Murphy’s account of holiness:

For a being to exhibit (primary) holiness is for that being to exhibit a set of features that (a) make it overwhelmingly desirable for those capable of certain unifying relationships with that being to stand in those unified relationships with that being and (b) make those who have grounds to see themselves as inadequate to be in the presence of that being ... unfit to stand in some such unified relationships with that being (42).

In Chapter 3 Murphy considers what characteristics a holy being must have to make the *fascinans* and *tremendum* responses apt. He argues that what grounds absolute holiness (being necessarily such that all other beings have apt attraction and unfittingness responses) is absolute perfection. To be absolutely perfect is to have all good-making features unlimitedly. Absolute perfection would guarantee the *fascinans* response for all creatures – “to be intimately related to a being who is absolutely perfect would be overwhelmingly attractive... for every possible creaturely subject” (48). It would also guarantee the *tremendum* response, since “every possible creature is... in some way significantly limited with respect to the value that it exhibits” (48). Because of this, “there will be a massive gap between the excellence exhibited by an absolutely perfect being and that exhibited by any other being” (48). This means that “for every possible creature and every relevant context of intimate relationship, there is a point at which that creature is not fit to be in that relationship with God” (49).

2. Murphy on Divine Holiness and Divine Action

I now turn my attention to Murphy’s case for the holiness framework and against the morality framework and the love framework. A framework for divine action is “a scheme by which divine action can be explained and predicted, and which applies to the divine being simply because that being is divine” (81). A framework for divine action aims to establish *necessary* motivations for God (though this doesn’t entail the necessity of God’s particular actions).

Chapter 5 gives Murphy’s case against the morality and love frameworks. Murphy lists what are generally considered the “standard” divine perfections – a perfect being will be an agent who is perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, rational, and free (84-85). The proponent of the morality framework also claims that God is morally perfect. Here’s Murphy’s statement of the morality framework:

[O]ur ability to explain and predict divine action is both enabled and constrained by the existence of a set of norms of morality which are not themselves the product of divine discretion but to which divine choice necessarily perfectly conforms (81).

Though there are many approaches to morality, the proponent of the morality framework might ground God's moral norms as follows: "the good of welfare subjects gives every possible agent [including God] reasons for action" because "the bearers of welfare are beings with intrinsic value" (93). But Murphy thinks if theism is true, creatures can't have intrinsic value; God is the only being who can have intrinsic value. So the best the morality framework proponent can do is posit that creatures have value by resembling or participating in the goodness of God,² and this objective (though not intrinsic) value grounds God's moral requirements to do good to created agents. In response, Murphy argues that the value of creatures rooted in their resemblance to God does not provide God with *requiring* reasons for acting for their good. Instead it would merely provide *justifying* reasons for acting for their good. This distinction is key for Murphy: justifying reasons provide "an opportunity for rational action, without... rational necessitation, even in the absence of considerations to the contrary"; requiring reasons "rationally necessitat[e] action in the absence of contrary considerations" (94).

Murphy then critiques the love framework, which he describes as follows: "our ability to explain and predict divine action is both enabled and constrained by God's being loving toward creatures" (81). Love has at least two components: benevolence (willing the good of the beloved), and what Murphy calls univolence (willing unity with the beloved). Murphy contends that love-as-benevolence does not provide God with requiring reasons to will our good. On the one hand, if God has requiring reasons to act benevolently rooted in the good of creatures, then this would be a moral requirement that God act benevolently, which reduces to the morality framework. On the other hand, if one wants to argue that love-as-benevolence is itself a divine perfection, then "the motivational state of *maximal* love-as-benevolence is the relevant perfection." But love-as-benevolence can't have a maximum, since it's always possible to will more creaturely good, "both with respect to whatever given set of creatures there is, and with respect to bringing about further creatures who can have lives worth living" (101).

Murphy then argues that love-as-univolence can't ground the love framework either. Here Murphy considers the arguments of J. L. Schellenberg, who claims that love-as-seeking-unity is a perfection for all persons, including God. This is not because of the good for the lover and/or the beloved; unitive love is intrinsically valuable. In response, Murphy argues that the most plausible understanding of the intrinsic value of unitive love is as agent-neutral value. But "it is implausible that its agent-neutral final value is not explanatorily posterior to the role it has in the flourishing of the parties; when we think it is good, full stop, for people to be friends, it is not as if that is a distinct fact independent of its being for the parties' flourishing" (105). Since God does not *need* anything in order to flourish, and since Murphy has already argued against human good as providing a requiring reason for divine action, this won't ground the love framework.

Having argued against the morality and love frameworks, in Chapter 6 Murphy explains and defends the holiness framework. He describes it as follows:

² A contemporary proponent of a view like this is Robert Adams. See Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The holiness framework presents God as having requiring reasons to respond to God's own goodness by refraining from entering into intimate relationships with beings that are limitedly good, and the more limited the goodness, the stronger these reasons are, and the more intimate the relationship, the stronger these reasons are (75-76).

Key to fleshing this framework out is the concept of reasons of status. Murphy defends the view that "one's being in a relationship with some other person might [be] beneath one's status—that the former's status gives that person reason not to enter into or remain in some relationship with the latter" (115). Murphy seeks to motivate this claim with a case that's restricted to a specific context. He considers a statement from David Foster Wallace that his playing tennis with Michael Joyce (a professional tennis player) would be "absurd and in a certain way obscene" (127). This sets up Murphy's argument that "If even between two humans, both finite creatures of roughly equal physical and mental powers, there can be reasons of status in some contexts... then *a fortiori* there will be those reasons with respect to the relationship between God and humans (118)."

One final aspect of Murphy's understanding of divine motivation needs to be discussed. Murphy acknowledges that even if the morality and love frameworks are false, and the holiness framework is true, God can still act motivated by moral concerns (or that which is analogous thereto) or love for creatures. Our good, and God's desire for union with his creatures, provide God with justifying, not requiring reasons. Murphy claims that it can be rational to act for justifying reasons over requiring reasons to the contrary (see 134-135). So God's acting for moral concerns or love for creatures would be contingent rather than necessary, and God's acting for moral concern or love for creatures would be something that should be in some sense surprising and astonishing. It's also something we should be incredibly thankful for.

3. Murphy's Application of the Holiness Framework

After defending the divine holiness framework in Chapter 6, the remainder of the book considers how the holiness framework impacts various issues concerning divine action – God's freedom in creation, the problem of evil and the problem of hiddenness (Ch 7), the incarnation (Ch 8), the atonement (Ch 9), heaven and hell (Ch 10), and divine humility (Ch 11). Murphy thinks that in each of these areas of divine action, the holiness framework provides key explanation and insight into divine action. The pattern of explanation is similar for each discussion; here I'll briefly present his application of the holiness framework to the problem of evil and the problem of hiddenness.

Murphy contends that the various contemporary presentations of the problem of evil all assume the morality framework. There's a tension between the evil in the world, or particular evils (depending on the iteration of the problem) and what we would expect a morally perfect God to do. But Murphy has argued that the morality framework is false, so "the problem of evil, as typically conceived, [becomes] a spurious problem" (148). One might attempt to argue instead that God must act motivated by love for his creatures (the love framework) and that the evil in the world is incompatible with this. But Murphy has given arguments for rejecting the love framework as well. Murphy acknowledges that there are still problems of evil for the holiness framework, but that the existence of evil can be accounted for by recognizing that God's holiness gives him reason not to intervene to prevent foreseen evil, since in doing so God would become more intimately related to said evils.

Murphy observes that the problem of hiddenness, as presented by Schellenberg, is rooted in the love framework – a perfectly loving God would ensure that there would be no nonresistant nonbelief. He notes that one can also motivate a problem of hiddenness from the morality framework, if one thinks that knowing that God exists is good for creatures (this would be a version of the problem of evil). So again, Murphy’s case against the morality and love frameworks undermines the problem of hiddenness. Further, the holiness framework makes it such that “we should not be surprised that God is hidden from so many” (155). Rather, since God has requiring reasons not to be related to limited beings, it is “striking... that God has reached out, even persistently, to call creatures to awareness of and into relation with God” (155).

4. Concerns for Murphy’s Project

There is much to commend in this book. One thing I particularly appreciated about Murphy’s model is that it captures the sense of wonder and thankfulness that seem to be appropriate responses to things like the creation of the world, the incarnation, and the atonement. This book is chock-full of arguments, all of which are thought-provoking; this is obviously a positive attribute for an analytic theology text. That being said, with regard to many of these arguments, I would like to push back against them, or at least seek more clarification. The biggest question I have about the project is about what seems to be a fundamental assumption – the distinction between requiring reasons and justifying reasons. As noted above, this distinction is key for Murphy’s rejection of the morality framework and the love framework, and his fleshing out the holiness framework. But there is little defense of this distinction. Murphy basically refers to the work of Joshua Gert for a defense (94, footnote 6). The way I (perhaps naively) think about reasons for actions has no distinction of this sort. We almost always find ourselves with various reasons for alternate actions. Sometimes the reasons to do X clearly outweigh the reasons for other actions, such that I ought to do X. At other times, the reasons for action are roughly on par, or they are incommensurable, so it is permissible and rational to choose any of the options. Murphy acknowledges that God has reasons to act benevolently toward us. But if there is no genuine distinction between requiring and justifying reasons, then it seems that Murphy would be forced to accept the morality framework, or the love framework, or both. This doesn’t mean that Murphy would need to reject the holiness framework; instead, God’s actions could be constrained by morality concerns and/or love concerns *and* holiness concerns.

I give one other concern I have with the argument. Murphy argues that because of the ontological difference between God and creatures, “for every possible creature and every relevant context of intimate relationship, there is a point at which that creature is not fit to be in that relationship with God” (49). This seems right to me. To parallel Murphy’s analogy of Wallace and Joyce, it would clearly be unfitting for me to seek to enter into a relationship of co-creating a new planet with God, or even to approach God with the familiarity that I would approach my best friend (at least without being invited to do so by God). But it doesn’t follow from this that there isn’t an appropriate type of personal relationship with God for humans, properly reflecting the ontological gap. After all, according to many in the Christian tradition (and other theistic traditions as well), humans were created *for* relationship with God and others. If this is so, then it seems like there would be a fitting type of relationship humans can have with God. So while I agree that there are types of relational intimacy that are unfitting

for creatures to enter into with God, I'm not sure how Murphy gets to the claim that God has "requiring reasons to respond to God's own goodness by refraining from entering into intimate relationships with beings that are limitedly good" (75).

Murphy defends several bold positions in this book. He hasn't convinced me of all of them. But he has presented arguments for his position that must be grappled with by anyone who is working in contemporary philosophical theology. This is an important work, and I highly recommend it.