

# An Introduction to the Symposium on Mark Murphy's *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*

Jordan Wessling  
Lindsey Wilson College

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this essay is to introduce the symposium within the *Journal of Analytic Theology* on Mark Murphy's latest book, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*. To this end, the main aims of Murphy's book are presented and the essays within the symposium are summarized.

Adherents to the Abrahamic faiths agree that God is supremely holy and that this holiness influences the manner in which God engages with creation. Nevertheless, philosophical theories of this holiness are hard to come by and rarely is the interrelation between divine holiness and divine action discussed in rigorous detail. Against this backdrop of neglect, Mark Murphy addresses both of these issues from a specifically Christian point of view in his latest book, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* (2021). The symposium within this journal features a collection of essays that respond to some of the central claims made within Murphy's book. The goal of the present essay is to introduce readers to this symposium by stating the main aims of Murphy's truly groundbreaking book and by summarizing the essays contained within the symposium.

## Murphy's Project

*Divine Holiness and Divine Action* contains two parts. In Part I, Murphy provides an account of divine holiness and also examines what such an account indicates about the divine nature. To develop the account of God's holiness, Murphy takes cues from Rudolf Otto's phenomenological analysis of the subject. The enduring core of Otto's work of which Murphy takes hold is that the holy is that to which intimate union is simultaneously desirable yet experienced as unfitting. The holy God, argues Murphy, merits such a dual response. Furthermore, the God of Scripture ought to be conceived of as *absolutely* holy in that (a) it is impossible for there to be a rational creature for whom intimate union with God would not be supremely and objectively desirable, and (b) there will always be some level of intimate union with God for which that same creature is objectively unfit.

Conceiving of God as absolutely holy is said to have a substantive implication regarding the divine nature. This is that the absolutely holy God must be absolutely perfect as well – there is no other plausible way of maintaining the requisite value gap between God and creature which ensures that the noted dual response is necessarily appropriate. Murphy thereby leverages his account of divine holiness as evidence against paradigms that allow that certain

metaphysical limitations may have it that God is the greatest possible being but not absolutely perfect *tout court* (cf. van Inwagen 2006, 32–6 and Nagasawa 2017, 92). Murphy also capitalizes on biblical evidence for the notion that God is absolutely holy as reason to hold that the God of Scripture is the God of those philosophers who operate within the Anselmian or perfect being tradition.

In Part II of the book, Murphy considers how his account of absolute holiness ought to inform our understanding of divine action. In contradiction to those who maintain that what fundamentally explains and predicts divine action are the norms of morality or love, Murphy argues that God is fundamentally motivated to act in ways that are appropriately responsive to the divine value. Since God enjoys a value that far surpasses the value of all else, God has good reason, in keeping with His holiness, not to be intimately united with creatures given that they are deficient, defective, or otherwise imperfect. The greater the limitations of the beings at issue and the more intimate the candidate relationship, the stronger the reasons are for God for refraining from entering into the relevant kind of relationship. Murphy refers to his preferred way of explaining and predicting divine action as the *holiness framework*.

The holiness framework relies on a distinction between two kinds of reasons for action, *requiring reasons* and *justifying reasons*. In the context of divine action, requiring reasons are those reasons that God (as a fully rational agent) must act upon unless He possesses adequate reason to perform some other action. Justifying reasons, by contrast, are those reasons that render a course of action optional for God, provided that God does not have sufficient reasons to act alternatively. This distinction is utilized to say that God has requiring reasons to refrain from entering into intimate relationships with creatures but nevertheless has justifying reasons to act for their benefit and enter into various kinds of intimate relationship with them. Hence, on the holiness framework for divine action, the weight of God's reasons generally favors keeping relational distance from creatures, though God may graciously choose to enter into numerous kinds of intimate relationship with them.

Significant theological ramifications of the holiness framework are explored by Murphy. One such ramification is that God's normative default is not to create and not to become incarnate (and if incarnate not to sin). That God would choose to create and become incarnate is surprising and wonderful, accounted for by justifying reasons corresponding to God's love. Plus, the holiness framework explains why the Atonement should be thought to include a solution to the normative obstacle that human sinfulness presents to divine-human union, over and above the manner in which sin erects human psychological challenges to such union. This holiness framework is also said to bear upon the doctrines of heaven and hell. Heaven should be understood *epektatically* (i.e., as a continuous perfecting of each human that renders greater degrees of union with God more fitting) and the possibility of a populated hell becomes more explicable. Finally, the holiness framework allows for insight into divine humility. God is humble insofar as He has not chosen to keep His distance from comparatively lowly beings but instead graciously acts to benefit and be united with them.

Apart from these theological considerations, the holiness framework also promises to circumvent standard articulations of two of the greatest intellectual challenges to theism, namely, arguments from evil and divine hiddenness. Arguments from evil typically proceed on the assumption that God would have (something like) requiring reasons to act in conformity to familiar moral norms or in step with the demands of maximal love for creatures to prevent some of the evils we observe. However, in the process of defending the holiness framework, Murphy seeks to undermine this assumption. God, conceived of as absolutely holy, does not have such requiring reasons. Similarly, arguments from divine hiddenness regularly assume that God would have (something like) requiring reasons, corresponding to His moral

perfection or perfect love, to reveal Himself more clearly and expansively than the facts allow. Against this, Murphy argues that God's default setting would be not to reveal Himself, since being known by humans is an intimate relationship which collides with God's requiring reasons of holiness. Should God choose to reveal Himself, this would be an instance of God's previously described, and totally optional, humility.

From this brief summary it should be clear that each part of Murphy's book has the potential to make significant contributions to important conversations in philosophy of religion and philosophical and systematic theology. Besides the issues just canvassed, Murphy's conclusions could inform future discussions related to metatheology (see Kvanvig 2021), liturgical theology and the norms of worship, and biblical depictions of apparently harsh divine treatment of humans (e.g., apparently capricious punishments and commands to do violence), alongside a host of other topics. Moreover, if Murphy's application of the holiness framework to the arguments from evil and divine hiddenness is correct (or perhaps even considerably plausible), then standard objections to theism have been upended. While Murphy's main arguments might fail, those familiar with Murphy's work will know that the affiliated reasoning is careful, expansive, enlightening, and well worth engaging.

But the overturning of established modes of thought is often met with resistance. We find this clearly with the symposium's contributors.

## The Symposium Contributions

The symposium is comprised of six essays. It begins with a précis of *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* from Murphy. The summary offered by Murphy is more detailed than the one I have provided here. Those who have not yet read *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* are thus invited to read this essay from Murphy before turning to the accompanying articles.

After Murphy's précis, the first contribution to the symposium is from Terence Cuneo and Jada Twedt Strabbing: "Wholly Good, Holy God." They argue that Murphy's account of divine holiness requires revision, since it does not have the resources to include apparently central experiences of the holy, such as awe and reverence. Additionally, Cuneo and Strabbing contend that a framework for divine action that integrates God's perfect goodness, lovingkindness, and holiness is more plausible than Murphy's bare holiness framework.

The next essay, "God's Things: An Essay in Secondary Holiness," comes from Samuel Fleischacker. Writing from a Jewish perspective, Fleischacker articulates a way of understanding secondary holiness, that is, the kind of derivative holiness that creatures, as opposed to God, can obtain. Although Murphy's book focuses on underived or primary holiness, he also provides a theory of secondary holiness. Murphy provides this because he believes that a desideratum of an account of primary holiness is that it naturally paves the way for a theory of secondary holiness. On Murphy's theory of secondary holiness, there are many ways in which a creature can be holy. But the most important feature is that a creature is secondarily holy by being a vehicle through which being intimately related to the creature constitutes being intimately related to God such that the dual response of desiring but being unfit for intimate union with God via the creature are characteristically appropriate. By contrast, Fleischacker understands the secondarily holy as that which has been set apart by God so that creatures might relate to God as a personal being. Fleischacker leaves it an open question as to whether, and to what degree, his favored account of secondary holiness is incompatible with the account defended by Murphy.

Jonathan Rutledge and I join forces for the symposium's fourth paper. This paper is entitled, "God of Holy Love: Toward an Agapist Alternative to Mark Murphy's Holiness Framework for Divine Action." As the subtitle makes clear, our goal is to offer an alternative to the holiness framework. What we label the *agapist framework* is centered on motives related to divine love yet assimilates aspects of Murphy's holiness framework into it. We contend that the agapist framework is more probable than Murphy's holiness framework with respect to central theological issues treated within *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*.

Sameer Yadav's paper, "All Shall Love Me and Despair! Murphy on Divine Holiness," objects to a number of important claims affiliated with Murphy's articulation of the holy God. Among these, Yadav objects to Murphy's account of holiness principally on scriptural grounds. For both theological and philosophical reasons, Yadav also objects to Murphy's holiness framework. He argues that Murphy is mistaken when he affirms that God's default motives are to withdraw from creatures rather than seek their welfare and union with them. Moreover, Yadav maintains that Murphy's commitments entail the problematic position that God must set-aside, even violate, the demands of His holiness to decide (contingently) to perform loving actions for creatures. Finally, Yadav raises doubts about Murphy's account of God as one who is only contingently humble but not one who is necessarily humble in character. Yadav appears to hold that the challenges he raises against Murphy's account of the holy God together provide us with sufficient reason to conclude that the account fails. We should be grateful for this, thinks Yadav. For if Murphy's account of the holy God were right, the fitting response to God would not be worship or thankfulness but tremendous despair.

The symposium ends with a response-essay from Murphy. There he treats what he takes to be the most pressing challenges raised by the other contributors against his views on divine holiness. Opinions are likely to diverge about whether Murphy's responses succeed. But it is the judgement of this symposium editor that Murphy's defense of his vision of the holy God goes a long way toward solidifying it as a serious contender for how we might conceive of God and His relationship to the world.

## References

- Kvanvig, Jonathan L. 2021. *Deity: A Metatheological Approach*. Oxford University Press  
Murphy, Mark C. 2021. *Divine Holiness & Divine Action*. Oxford University Press.  
Nagasawa, Yujin. 2017. *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism*. Oxford University Press.  
van Inwagen, Peter. 2006. *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford University Press.