Response to Mark Murphy’s “Suárez’s ‘Best Argument’ and the Dependence of Morality on God”

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Many thanks to Mark Murphy for a probing and well-crafted paper on the subject of God and morality. He makes the very interesting suggestion that instead of beginning with morality, then ascertaining some aspect of it that defies explanation in terms of finite goods, and finally finding a way to God who alone can make sense of morality, we should start with God, with His sovereignty over creation and in particular over human affairs, and see what follows for our understanding of morality. Instead of ascending from morality to God he proposes descending from God to morality. For the purpose of this response I will follow Murphy on this path, even though I am not convinced that the older and more established path of ascending to God from morality is quite so vulnerable to the God-of-the-gaps criticism that Murphy makes of it. I shall return briefly to this subject at the end of these remarks.

For now let us let God be God, and let us let Him to be sovereign over us, and let us ask what follows for morality. According to Murphy, what follows is this: the finite goods on which the moral life is based, and which can be understood by believer and non-believer alike, are understood by the believer as involving some likeness to God, who is Goodness Itself. Thus God enters into the innermost constitution of morality; He is revealed as its source. When Murphy goes on to explain just how we are to understand God as source of morality, he looks for parallels between the way in which God is the first cause of the natural order, and the way in which God is the supreme source of the moral order. Just as God, who is Being Itself, gives being to all things in nature, so He grounds by His Goodness all goodness and rightness in the moral order. But just as natural things have their own natures and their own powers of acting, so finite goods have their own goodness and their own power of binding us. So as to think about the divine contribution and the creaturely contribution together, Murphy invokes the concept of “concurrentism.” Just as God is active as first cause in the midst of the secondary causes of nature, so God is present as supreme good in the midst of the finite goods and norms of the natural law. Thus Murphy takes the concept of “concurrentism,” which has hitherto been used only for thinking about divine
causality and secondary causality, and proposes to use it for thinking about
divine goodness and human morality.

I have a question for Murphy, a distinctly phenomenological ques-
tion. Does a person who begins as an agnostic and ends as a believer experi-
ence morality differently as a result of becoming a believer? Let us suppose
that this person undergoes his conversion under the direction of Murphy, so
that he ends as a concurrentist: has his experience of his moral life changed?
Or does Murphy’s concurrentism just give us knowledge about the ultimate
source of morality, but without changing our lived experience of it? One
might well doubt that concurrentism changes this experience, given Murphy’s
reliance on the parallel between natural concurrentism and moral concur-
rentism. For it is not clear that the person who at first recognizes only sec-
ondary causes in nature, and then comes to acknowledge God as first cause,
experiences the secondary causes any differently. Even after he has become
a theist this person will still give the same explanations that he previously
gave for events in nature, since God as first cause does not function as a
particular cause that affects particular outcomes. So it seems that the person
who becomes a moral concurrentist will discern the same morally relevant
goods that he had always discerned, and the same moral duties too; for on
the concurrentist model God does not add new particular goods and duties,
He rather adds a whole new metaphysical dimension. I, however, want to
suggest that when we descend from God to morality, we do not just gain
new knowledge about the ultimate source of morality, but we also experience
morality differently. Let me give just two examples of the way in which the
moral experience of the one who has become a believer is transformed.

First, in his essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” Wil-
liam James describes the very transformation that I am aiming at. He says,
in a merely human world without a God…life, to be sure, is…a
genuinely ethical symphony; but it is played in the compass of a
couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to
open up…. When, however, we believe that a God is there, and
that he is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out.
The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged. The more
imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new ob-
jectivity and significance, and to utter the…shattering, tragically
challenging note of appeal…. All through history…we see the
antagonism of the strenuous and genial moods, and the contrast
between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligation from on
high, and those of prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need.¹

This sounds right; James seems to capture vividly the way in which morality is “raised to a higher power” once one has added God to one’s moral life. Does Murphy agree that the move from agnosticism to theism changes our experience of morality in this way? Does his concurrentism envision this kind of drastic change in our experience of morality? Or does envisioning such a change seem to him “to denigrate the created order” and “to think of it as lacking unity and integrity” of its own?

My second example may be more challenging for Murphy. Recall Plato’s argument against suicide at the beginning of the *Phaedo*. He says that we human beings are not entirely our own, but that we belong to the gods, through whom we exist. Just as a slave would do wrong to his owner by committing suicide on his own initiative, treating his life as his own when in fact it belongs to his owner, so a human being does wrong to the gods by committing suicide. Transpose the argument from Greek polytheism to Christian monotheism, and it becomes only stronger: I am not in every respect my own, but belong to the God who created and who sustains me out of nothing. Suicide is an impiety, an offense against the *religio* by which I am connected to God. Here, then, we have a definite moral norm that does not exist for the person who has only morality and no God; only the theist recognizes this norm. I realize that some philosophers whom I greatly respect think that the good of human life, unsupported by any theistic considerations, suffices to explain the intrinsic wrong of suicide, but I cannot see this, at least not in every case of suicide. When death is imminent, and suffering is overwhelming, I do not find that the appeal to the good of human life yields a conclusive prohibition on suicide. To my mind, only the fact that I am not my own but belong to my maker, who is sovereign over me, binds me to abstain from suicide in every case.

Here we seem to have a case in which the move from agnosticism to theism changes our experience of morality in the sense of giving us a moral norm that we did not previously have. Does this seem to Murphy to “denigrate the created order”? to disparage the completeness of our natural moral knowledge? Does this argument against suicide think of God too much as adding something to morality rather than grounding the whole of morality? Does it seem to Murphy to smack of the God-of-the-gaps God?

There is one concern of Murphy’s that the argument against suicide does not play into. In the contemporary discussion one often thinks of God as adding something to morality as a result of issuing some command. Mur-

Phy has been an able critic of different “theological voluntarists,” as those are called who suppose that God enlarges “natural morality” by His commanding. But there is no divine command at stake in Plato’s argument. God does not have to command us to abstain from suicide; prior to issuing any commands God is sovereign and I exist as His creature; this metaphysical situation suffices to establish the impiety of suicide. And yet, though God does not command, His presence at the center of morality seems to give rise to a new norm, a norm that does not appear to the agnostic.

Throughout this response I have tried to follow Murphy and his proposal that we should descend from God to morality. I conclude now by going back to Murphy’s reservations about the old way of ascending to God from morality, and in particular of ascending from certain aspects of morality that seem to defy any finite explanation. Recall Murphy’s God-of-the-gaps objection. Perhaps you now see why I don’t find this objection fatal to the ascending path. For we get something that looks like the God-of-the-gaps even when we descend from God to morality; even here we find God giving rise to particular changes in morality, such as raising morality to a higher power, as described by James, or such as adding a prohibition of suicide that is not fully intelligible without God, as claimed by Plato. If God makes His presence felt in morality in such particular ways, then it need not always be a mistake to use some particular aspect of morality as a way of leading to God, as Newman does in his analysis of conscience; if we seize on an aspect that really is connected in a particular way to God, we may be able to ascend through that aspect to some glimpse of God as the source of all morality. Thus in thinking through the descending way, pioneered by Murphy, I find myself led back to the old ascending way, and so led to the conclusion that we need both ways in our exploration of God and morality.

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