

Response to Christopher Tollefsen’s “Morality and God”

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Let me begin by thanking Dr. Tollefsen for his paper, and Dr. Crosby for inviting me to comment on it. I find this paper extremely engaging and useful for organizing my own thoughts on several topics.

What to me was most provocative in it was his discussion of commands. I also found the last section of his paper the most elegant in its synthetic solution to a number of vexed questions having to do with the way in which God communicates the natural law to us. I think Tollefsen is right in his concluding assessment that “our view of God’s communication of the law—natural, divine, and, let us say, personal—has perhaps been somewhat deformed by our relying on too close an analogy to the imperatival form of speech act associated with human positive law and to the form of speech act associated with imperfect human fathers of intransigent children.”¹ The “authoritative invitations,” as Tollefsen describes them, seem to me to strike the right sort of balance that natural lawyers are looking for between the ways in which we are motivated to act rightly by being the desiring and deliberating beings we are and the ways in which God exercises authority over the universe, and indeed our very natures, *via* the Eternal Law. The doctrine of hell suggests that perhaps not all of God’s communications can be thought of just as authoritative invitations since the threat of damnation seems to imply something stronger than an ignored invitation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that a great many divine communications can helpfully be thought of in terms of authoritative invitations.

It is with some hesitation that I offer a few comments on the first section of Tollefsen’s paper since it concerns several points of dispute between him and Mark Murphy. Notwithstanding these misgivings, let me offer a few observations on the topic of God as explanation of morality in the hope of clarifying what might be in dispute between Murphy and Tollefsen on this issue.

What is an explanation? What sort of work ought it to do? What should we expect from an explanation? It is no fault of Tollefsen that he does not take up an elaborate answer to these questions in a paper dealing with how God explains morality, for the answers to these sorts of questions often

¹ See p. 60 above.

need to be taken as given if we are to make progress in answering other questions. However, I do suspect there to be some variance in the answers that Murphy and Tollefsen might give to these general questions, which has an effect on their respective explanations of God's relationship to morality. And indeed, Tollefsen himself suggests something like this when he describes his and Murphy's competing accounts of God as explanation of morality as representing differences in emphases.

Tollefsen claims that Murphy's employment of a participation account of the relationship between created and uncreated good is, in addition to being unclear, insufficiently primary. The account Tollefsen describes as Murphy's is an account which has its roots, as Tollefsen notes, in Neoplatonism, but it is important to mention here that it is also an account thoroughly Christianized by Augustine, as well as by Pseudo-Dionysius, who is eventually channeled through Aquinas. Tollefsen offers the new natural lawyers' account of God's presence in the laws of morality, as illustrated through Tollefsen's *Dungeon and Dragon's* analogy, as more primary because of its emphasis on God's agency and purposes.

It seems to me that both these explanations are, in fact, explanations of God's relation to morality, that they are then compatible in some as yet unspecified way, and that in fact the question of which is primary to the other depends upon what exactly one is looking for in an explanation. Tollefsen's explanation, it seems to me, does a very good job of explaining aspects of the human motivational framework as well as God's involvement in that framework. So, let's call Tollefsen's account of how God explains morality a motivational explanation. There are, to be sure, metaphysical implications in Tollefsen's motivational explanation, but they are not of primary significance, as I think the reliance on the *Dungeons and Dragons* example makes evident.

Murphy's explanation, on the other hand, is primarily metaphysical. To be sure, there are motivational implications to Murphy's explanation, but they are not what is primary to it, for, as Murphy tells us, this explanation takes its first steps from the nature of God and then moves to the difference that nature makes for the world created by him. Murphy's explanation reaches, I would argue, deeper than Tollefsen's, if depth is to be measured by the standard of accounting for the very being of things. Moreover, it seems to me that participation does not have to imply what Tollefsen worries about; namely, that it is "God's goodness, as it were, shining through the goods of human nature that makes them desirable and response-worthy."² It is not God's goodness *qua* God's goodness that depends on God's goodness when looking at the order of created goods. The goodness of the beings that depend on God is really the goodness of *those* beings, depending on God.

² See p. 52 above.

This substantially-independent participatory dependency is possible within a Thomistic framework because of the primacy of the principle of *esse*, the very being of beings, as constitutive of the individuality of any being. In the case of created beings, goodness is predicated on the being of beings, and so is individualized *via* that dependency. To be sure, the very being of beings and their goodness is immediately dependent on, and so participates in, the being and goodness of God. Yet this points to one aspect of the wonder of God's creative act: It is by virtue of being and so goodness's dependency on God that each being *is* individually and so is individually good. The existential structure within which the motivational dimensions of the natural law which Tollefsen specifies is presupposed for those dimensions to exist in the first place, and some version of participation is I think requisite for making sense of this existential structure. Put more plainly, explanations of nature's relation to God that do not account for the creative act presuppose an account of the creative act, Murphy's explanation of participation does account for the creative act whereas Tollefsen's does not explicitly do so, and so Murphy's explanation would seem to me the one that is more primary. But, again, I really ought to leave this dispute between Tollefsen and Murphy to Tollefsen and Murphy.

My last comments and questions are all clustered around Tollefsen's descriptions of the Kingdom of heaven. I do think it necessary to account for the Kingdom of heaven as integral to any explanation of our final end. However, Tollefsen's description of the Kingdom leaves me with some concerns.

First, Tollefsen focuses on the motivational force the Kingdom of heaven should have on us. I found the effects of the Kingdom to be pretty well explored in Tollefsen's account. However, I would like to hear more about what precisely the Kingdom is, especially as it is conceived by Tollefsen not to coincide with the beatific vision.

Second, I am not convinced that the tradition has so narrowly conceived the beatific vision as to exclude the Kingdom of heaven from it. To be sure, Aquinas, for example, argues that the unmediated contemplation of God himself is sufficient for our happiness. But it is not so clear to me that this claim excludes the Kingdom as necessary to our happiness, particularly if we don't think of the Kingdom as somehow *alongside* our heavenly abidance in God, but rather as coming to fulfillment *within* that glorified life in God.

Third, one of the ways in which Tollefsen does characterize the Kingdom as distinct from the beatific vision strikes me as wrong, and that is when he characterizes the Kingdom as our "true natural end," as opposed to the beatific vision which comes about through our supernatural sharing in God's nature. Perhaps the problem is with a misunderstanding of mine regarding what Tollefsen means, but here is why this strikes me as wrong:

As Tollefsen notes, the Kingdom of heaven, *qua* Kingdom of heaven, only has motivational force for Christians. How else does this force come about except through faith in its ideal existence, and hope in its realizability. But faith and hope of this sort are theological virtues. As such, they are infused in our nature directly by God, and extend us beyond the strictly natural level of typical motivational ends. It is by means of our adoption by God that we can enter into his heavenly family, the Kingdom of heaven. That adoption is predicated on the passion and resurrection of the Second Person of the Trinity, and is itself then a sharing in the life of the Godhead. So, it is not just the beatific vision that is predicated on a supernatural elevation of our nature, but so too is our entry into the Kingdom. It is not then the case that the beatific vision corresponds to our supernatural end and the Kingdom to our natural one. This is at least one piece of evidence for why we may not want to separate the Kingdom of heaven from the beatific vision as distinct ends.

My thanks again to Dr. Tollefsen for the opportunity to reflect on this paper.

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