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God and Morality: A Philosophical History

By John E. Hare

Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007; vi + 309 pp.; hb. £ 45.00; ISBN: 978-0-631-23607-8.

This book explores the role God has played in selected Western ethical theories from antiquity to the present. John E. Hare approaches his ambitious topic by examining the work of four principal authors: Aristotle, Duns Scotus, Immanuel Kant and Richard Mervyn Hare who are, respectively, presented as focussing their ethical theories on virtue, will, duty, and consequences.

The theories of the four main authors are investigated explicitly in view of the question of the role which God, or theism, plays in each author's moral framework and reasoning. John Hare identifies four different conceptions of God across the four theories; namely, 'God as magnet' (drawing human beings towards the divine kind of life), 'God as lover' (who chooses for human beings the route by which they are to become co-lovers of God), 'God as sovereign' (of the Kantian kingdom of ends), and 'God as model' (of how ethical thought should be practised) (p. 3). The different theories are carefully analysed, with reference not only to the well known major writings of the four authors but also to their less prominent works. One strong point of the text is that the authors and their theories are not presented as effectively isolated from each other as is sometimes the case in works on the history of ethics, philosophy, or theology. Rather, John Hare explicitly relates them to each other, for instance referring back to Aristotle and Duns Scotus when analysing Kant. By so doing, similarities and differences (or John Hare's interpretation of them) become apparent, and the four theories are thus presented as parts of one cohesive history of Western ethical thought.

At the beginning of each chapter covering one of the main authors, John Hare briefly looks at other writers, both philosophers and theologians, dating from 'the time between'. For example, between Duns Scotus and Immanuel Kant; Francisco de Suarez, Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, William of Ockham, John Calvin, Gottfried von Leibniz, Christian Wolff and Christian August Crusius (as protagonists in the debate between rationalist and pietists in eighteenth-century Germany), Francis Hutcheson and David Hume are put forward as British empiricists who also strongly influenced Kant. In addition to this, the broader cultural-historical context is addressed, for example in brief analyses of art pieces such as Raphael's *The School of Athens* and *The Disputá* or Brunelleschi's *Pazzi chapel*. Both the passages on the writers from the periods

between John Hare's main theorists and the sections on the artworks are very short, but they nevertheless provide an interesting and informative context from which to better understand the writings of Hare's main authors.

More crucially, in the closing section of each chapter covering one of the main authors, the theory of a twentieth- or twenty-first-century successor is also discussed, who – according to John Hare – de-theologizes the respective ethical theory. These successors are Larry Arnhart (who attempts to construct an Aristotelian system of evolutionary ethics), Jean-Paul Sartre, Christine Korsgaard, and Peter Singer. John Hare argues that the abandonment of theism by each of these authors weakens the rest of the moral theory. According to John Hare the moral theories of Aristotle, Duns Scotus, Kant and R.M. Hare are to a certain extent united insofar as they are interpreted (by John Hare) as abstracting one part of God's relation to humankind as especially important for morality: the character that God wants us to have, God's commandments, God's love and our freedom to respond to this love, etcetera. If the theistic premises in the original theories are removed, the unity between the theories is destroyed. This is why, according to John Hare, the theories of the 'successors' are more different from each other than those of Aristotle, Scotus, Kant and R.M. Hare. This claim is elucidated in the concluding chapter of the book where the author develops a systematic theory that combines insights from the preceding chapters and relies centrally on theological premises. The result is a moral theory which places God at the centre, commanding the moral law.

John Hare explicitly states that this book is not an introductory text on the history of ethics and it is worth re-emphasising this point here. The author has succeeded in writing an interesting and highly informative study on the role of God in selected Western ethical theories. His analyses of the moral theories of Aristotle, Duns Scotus, Kant and R.M. Hare and the comparison with the works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers provide new and often surprising insights that cannot be found in an 'ordinary' histories of ethics. However, the reader should always bear in mind that John Hare's study takes a very specific perspective. Because of this, particular elements of each moral theory get more attention than others which might be just as important. It is useful, therefore, to already be familiar with at least the essential elements of the theories discussed in this book.

Furthermore, one needs to be aware that writing a book like this requires making choices; selecting some authors means omitting others. It could be doubted, for example, that Larry Arnhart is a good choice as a representative of a de-theologized Aristotelian moral philosophy—are there no more important positions than his? More important is the question of why John Hare did not include Thomas Aquinas and natural law theory in his analysis. It is very surprising to write a book on the Western philosophical history of God and Morality without including Thomas Aquinas, especially given that there are several contemporary authors who 'de-theologize' natural law theory.

However, even if one wishes to replace one author or include another, and even if one does not agree with Hare's conclusions in the final chapter, this book

certainly deserves careful study. It is recommendable especially, but not only, for those who are interested in the history of God's role within selected ethical theory in the West.