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Divine Motivation theory

Widely regarded as one of the foremost figures in contemporary philosophy of religion, Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski has written a new book that will be seen as a major contribution to ethical theory and theological ethics.

At the core of the book lies a new form of virtue theory based on the emotions. Distinct from deontological, consequentialist, and teleological virtue theories, this one has a particular theological, indeed Christian, foundation. The new theory helps to resolve philosophical problems and puzzles of various kinds: the dispute between cognitivism and noncognitivism in moral psychology; the claims and counterclaims of realism and antirealism in the metaphysics of value; and paradoxes of perfect goodness in natural theology, including the problem of evil.

A central feature of Zagzebski's theory is the place given to exemplars of goodness. This allows the theory to assume discrete but overlapping forms in different cultures and religions.

As with Zagzebski's previous Cambridge book, *Virtues of the Mind*, this new book will be sought out eagerly by a broad range of professionals and graduate students in philosophy and religious studies.

Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski is Kingfisher College Chair of the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma.

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For Ken

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I think he would need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above; at first he would see shadows most easily, then reflections of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. After this he would see objects in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, the light of the stars and the moon more easily than the sun and the light of the sun during the day. – Of course.

Then at last he would be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or in some alien place, but the sun itself in its own place, and be able to contemplate it. – That must be so.

Plato, *Republic* 516a-b

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Preface

There are two very different sensibilities out of which moral discourse and even entire moral theories arise. One is the idea that morality attracts. The other is the idea that morality compels. The former focuses on value, the latter on obligation. The former is optimistic enough to think that human beings are drawn to morality by nature and by the good and bad features of the world. The latter is pessimistic enough to think that only law – which is to say, force – can be the source of morality. This is not a negligible difference; it grounds the difference between virtue theories and duty theories. I have occasionally heard philosophers wonder whether there is any significant difference between the two kinds of theory and whether the difference matters. For many of the purposes of morality, it is useful to ignore the differences or to conceal them; the theory of this book is meant to reveal them.

The theory is a strong form of virtue theory with a theological foundation, although I will begin with a general framework that can have a naturalistic form. There are many different ways in which God can be related to morality, but the one that has received the most attention in the history of ethics is Divine Command theory. This is surprising, because quite apart from the famous objections to it, Divine Command theory has rarely aspired to be a complete moral theory. At best, it gives ethics a theoretical foundation, but it is difficult to see how we can move from a foundation

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of that kind to a theory with anything but the most meager normative content. However, my own reason for looking elsewhere for the foundation of ethics has nothing to do with these shortcomings. Divine Command theory is an ethic of law, of obligation. It is an ethic based on compulsion, not on the perception of value. I want to investigate a theological virtue ethics in which morality is driven by the attractiveness of the good.

The theories in which morality attracts are usually forms of theories that we have inherited from ancient Greece. Theories in which morality compels make up most of modern ethics. Natural Law theory was a brilliant attempt to have it both ways. That is how I read the ethics of Aquinas. Aquinas claimed that morality is law, but it is a law based on human nature, a nature that contains an innate propensity toward the good. When sufficiently developed, however, it turned out that there was nothing especially natural about natural law. That is not to say that Natural Law theory should be dismissed. In fact, I believe that it is one of the most viable of all the kinds of ethical theory, and one of its most appealing aspects in its Thomistic form is that, unlike Divine Command theory, it gives a theological foundation to a full ethical theory. Nonetheless, it is not the kind of theory I will pursue, because it also is fundamentally an ethic of obligation, and my purpose is to see how far we can get with an ethic of the good.

Another brilliant attempt to have it both ways is the Kantian idea of morality as autonomy: Morality is a law I give to myself. Presumably, if I give a law to myself, that mitigates the sense in which morality is force. This is not an ethic of attraction, but at least it does not subject us to the tyranny of external law. Kant's ethics is surely one of the most important ethical theories under discussion today, but I have chosen not to pursue a version of this theory, and again, my reason is that it is essentially an ethic of obligation. In my view, Kantian ethics does not give a sufficiently prominent place to the attractiveness of the good.

In Plato, the good attracts, and one of the most potent and enduring Platonic images of the good is the sun. I find it revealing that the sun not only attracts but also diffuses. The Earth does not have to move toward the sun in order to reflect its light. Plato's

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analogy suggests that the good is not exclusively something external to us that draws us toward it. The good may also be something we receive. It might even be in ourselves, diffusing itself through our acts. We too may have the capacity to bestow good upon the world. Hopefully, the obvious impertinence of this thought is mitigated by the further thought that we are not the original bestower of value.

My purpose in this book is to present an ethical theory driven by the concept of the good. In what follows, I propose an idea for the consideration of the community of philosophers. The full theory as it appears here is proposed to the community of Christian philosophers, but I have given a lot of attention to its naturalistic version, which is a form of nonteleological virtue ethics. I hope to engage Kantian, consequentialist, and neo-Aristotelian virtue theorists in a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of ethics, whether or not they are committed to any religious beliefs.

Some ethicists find theory of any kind problematic. It must be admitted that theory always sacrifices something – richness of detail, a certain kind of subtlety, and sometimes clarity. But I am convinced that there is a deep human need to theorize. What is wonderful about theory is that it compensates for the finitude of the human mind. It is our human misfortune that we are not capable of conscious awareness of very much at one time, and so we try to streamline conscious reality so that as much as possible can be packed into a single act of understanding. Theory extends the scope of our understanding. At its best, it gives us the maximum possible scope consistent with maximum clarity. But theory involves abstraction from particulars, and the act of abstraction necessarily leaves something behind. What is left behind might be important, and if so, that ought also to be the object of investigation. A good theory should be compatible with work on the particulars of the subject matter, and it should give that work a simple and natural structure. We want it to clarify and resolve the muddles we get into when we focus on one particular at a time, and above all, a theory should strengthen our grasp of the whole. What we should scrupulously strive to avoid is a way of theorizing that leaves behind what is most important. Bernard Williams

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claims that that is what has happened with the most abstract ethical concepts – *right*, *good*, and *duty*, what he calls the “thin” ethical concepts. But even if moral practice could survive the elimination of these concepts, how could we understand such a morality? Abstraction gives us scope, and thinness is the price of scope and a certain kind of understanding. Some philosophers would gladly sacrifice scope for something else that they value – richness, thickness, imaginative power. I suspect that this difference in values can be largely explained by differences in philosophical temperament.

What is depth? Do we understand moral reality more deeply when we concentrate on what theory leaves behind and try to reveal that part of reality that resides in the most subtle detail? Or does theory have its own kind of depth? The theory of this book is designed to honor both theory and narrative detail by explaining the importance of narrative in the structure of the theory, but I will not tell many stories. I will attempt to situate the idea of the paradigmatically good person within the metaphysics of morals. The theory proposes that the most basic moral feature of the universe is the way such a person perceives the world, a kind of perception that is affective and that is expressed in “thick” concepts. An affective perception of the world is what I believe constitutes an emotion.

What follows is an ethical theory based on the emotions of a perfect being.

*Norman, Oklahoma**May 28, 2003*

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book originated in a response I gave to a paper by Bill Rowe on John Hick's way of handling the problem of evil, at a conference on Hick's work at Claremont McKenna College, April 7–8, 1989. At that time, I was writing a book on the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge, and I decided to leave for another time the task of investigating whether the idea had any merit. Since then, I have worked on parts of the theory in a number of papers and have been influenced by the work of many philosophers, sometimes without realizing it until I read their work a second time. I know that this is true of the influence of Bob Adams and Bill Alston. It is no doubt true of many other people whom I cannot name. I especially want to thank Tom Carson, whom I have never met. He read and commented on the entire manuscript, and during the course of e-mail correspondence we discovered many mutual interests and ideas.

I wrote a first draft of the book during the academic year 1998–99, while I was on leave from Loyola Marymount University as Senior Fellow in the Lilly Fellows Program at Valparaiso University. I am grateful to Loyola Marymount and to the Lilly Foundation for support during that year. In the fall of 1999, I began teaching at the University of Oklahoma and taught a graduate seminar on the manuscript. I thank the students in that seminar for their many probing questions and objections. On April 19–20, 2001, the

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Philosophy Department and the College of Arts and Sciences at OU hosted a conference on my work to inaugurate my chair. Bill Alston gave a paper at that conference critiquing Divine Motivation theory, which was invaluable in getting me to introduce the theory in a different way.

I spent May 2000 as a guest of the Theology Department at the University of Uppsala. Some of the work of this project was presented there, and I thank my hosts, Eberhard Hermann and Mikael Stenmark, and the Swedish government for bringing me there for a month of interesting conversation in a beautiful place.

I also thank John Hare and Calvin College's Center for Christian Scholarship for bringing me to Calvin for a week of philosophical conversation in August of 2000. John Hare, Bob Roberts, and I read large portions of each other's related book manuscripts and enjoyed a lively week of discussion and debate.

In the spring of 2002, I had teaching leave from OU to work on the manuscript, and I thank the Philosophy Department for its support. I also thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Summer Stipend for the summer of 2002, during which time I wrote a completely new draft of the first eight chapters.

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Finally, I want to thank my research assistants, Kyle Johnson and Tony Flood, who provided me valuable bibliographic assistance and help with preparing the final version of the manuscript.

Ideas from a number of my previously published papers are used in various chapters of the book:

Portions of "Emotion and Moral Judgment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological* 66:1 (January 2003), pp. 104–124, appear in Chapters 2 and 3.

Ideas from "The Virtues of God and the Foundations of Ethics," *Faith and Philosophy* 15:4 (October 1998), pp. 538–552, appear in Chapter 5.

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Portions of “The Incarnation and Virtue Ethics,” in *The Incarnation*, edited by Daniel J. Kendall and Gerald O’ Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), appear in Chapter 6.

Some of the ideas in “Perfect Goodness and Divine Motivation Theory,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 21 (1997) (Philosophy of Religion), pp. 296–310, are used in Chapter 7.

Fragments from “An Agent-Based Approach to the Problem of Evil,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 39 (June 1996), pp. 127–139, appear in Chapter 8.

Some of the principles of rationality proposed in Chapter 9 come from “Religious Diversity and Social Responsibility,” *Logos* 4:1 (Winter 2001), pp. 135–155; published in Spanish in *Comprender la religion*, edited by Javier Aranguren, Jon Borobia, and Miguel Lluch, Eunsa (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 2001), pp. 69–85.

Some discussion of the Divine Command theory of Bob Adams in Chapter 6 is taken from “Obligation, Good Motives, and the Good” (symposium paper on Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*), *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64:2 (March 2002), pp. 453–458.

I thank all those from whom I benefited in writing these papers as well. Many people have encouraged the development of my ideas; some keep me within the bounds of critical normalcy; most do both. I am very grateful for all of these friendships.