

God in Moral Experience

The Apostle Paul defined the moral values of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness as “the fruit of God’s Spirit.” Paul Moser here argues that such values are character traits of an intentional God. When directly experienced, they can serve as evidence for the reality and goodness of such a God. Moser shows how moral conscience plays a key role in presenting intentional divine action in human moral experience. He explores this insight in chapters focusing on various facets of moral experience – regarding human persons, God, and theological inquiry, among other topics. He enables a responsible assessment of divine reality and goodness, without reliance on controversial arguments of natural theology. Clarifying how attention to moral experience can contribute to a limited theodicy for God and evil, Moser’s study also acknowledges that the reality of severe evil does not settle the issue of God’s existence and goodness.

PAUL K. MOSER is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author of numerous books, most recently *Paul’s Gospel of Divine Self-Sacrifice: Righteous Reconciliation in Reciprocity*, *Divine Guidance: Moral Attraction in Action*, and *The Divine Goodness of Jesus: Impact and Response* (all Cambridge University Press).

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PAUL K. MOSER
*Loyola University
Chicago*

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Values and Duties Personified



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Preface

Shakespeare introduced talk of “for goodness’ sake” with a telling sentiment in *Henry VIII*: “For goodness’ sake, consider what you do, how you may hurt yourself, ay, utterly.” What we “do” often bears on the goodness that comes or does not come to us. Our “doing” in this regard includes the questions we pursue, as they can inform and reveal the focus of our lives in relation to what is good.

This book pursues a demanding question that can be for goodness’ sake: Can we humans have lives with lasting meaning and value, and, if so, does God have any role here? This question is demanding because, going beyond short-term meaning, it asks about seemingly elusive meaning for human life that lasts – a tall order for most inquirers. If God does have a role here, *which* God, and *how*? Good answers do not come easy, but they still may come if we approach our questions responsibly. This book contends that they do come, if with important moral challenges for humans.

Our culture at large may or may not value the questions to be pursued here, but, upon reflection, many members of our culture do value them. We shall see why our questions merit our careful reflection, even if some inquirers lack optimism about lasting meaning for our lives. We shall assess the importance of our questions in relation to God’s role, if any, in lasting meaning and value for human life. If God exists, God may seek to have all of us “educated” in a divine school of lasting moral makeover for us, for our own good, and thus “for goodness’ sake.” Whether we excel in this moral education remains to be seen, but we shall ask about its importance and its prospects for us as morally responsible persons.

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Our inquiry bears on what we are entitled to hope for regarding human life, particularly a morally good human life. This matter differs from what we happen to hope for because it calls for *grounded* hope – that is, hope with adequate reason or support. This is hope that goes beyond wishful thinking to responsible hope, based on our relevant evidence. We will clarify what the relevant evidence looks like, thereby saving us from looking in the wrong places for lasting meaning and value. For goodness' sake, we cannot afford to look for the living among the dead, or for God in what has no divine goodness. It is an occupational hazard among philosophical inquirers to look for God in the wrong places. We shall resist that hazard.

Some inquirers agree with Albert Camus that we humans share the absurd, hopeless predicament of Sisyphus in Homer's myth. The myth has Sisyphus doomed to rolling a rock up a hill, only to have the rock roll down, leading to a repetition of futile rock-rolling, with no end or gain in sight. His life thus has no robust meaning or value, let alone lasting meaning or value. Even so, Camus praises Sisyphus as an "absurd hero" for his persistence in avoiding collapse from bitter despair. He remarks that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy." Many people concur, holding that *we* are Sisyphus, like it or not. We, however, shall entertain doubts about that spin on a tragic myth. Even if we face tragedy in life, and that seems unavoidable for us, we still must ask if our lives match the hopeless absurdity faced by Sisyphus.

Perhaps there is a caring purpose-bearer and purpose-giver behind the veil of human tragedy. This would be a benevolent intentional agent who, however elusive, is capable of guiding the world for goodness' sake, including for lasting good in cooperative human lives. That option seems imaginable, but is it just imaginary? We should ask whether anything indicates it to be a reality beyond a fantasy. The key, we shall see, is in our experience of some moral values and duties, including love, joy, peace, and patience, that arguably seek, as divine character traits, to guide us in distinctive moral ways for the sake of character formation.

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We shall examine the intended moral impact of the traits in question and our chosen response, considering that our attitude toward them may amount to our attitude toward God, even if we do not acknowledge God. The relevant evidence could be right before our eyes – or at least the eyes of our conscience – while we still overlook it. This book aims to challenge such overlooking by bringing a neglected kind of self-awareness and self-adaptation involving moral conscience to bear on moral values and duties that intentionally challenge us for goodness' sake.

Neglect of the moral values and duties to be identified, we shall see, entails neglect not only of God but also of crucial evidence of God's reality and goodness in divine character traits disclosed in moral experience. God, we might say, hides and seeks, and even self-reveals, in these values and duties as they are intended to have a moral impact on us and to represent qualities of divine personality. More to the point, God self-reveals divine valuing and caring toward us with these values and duties when experienced, aiming to persuade us and to influence our wills without coercion to comply with them.

The divine aim is to have us comply voluntarily, in order for us to become worthy beneficiaries and representatives of God's moral character, thus building a community of God's people. In this perspective, we are not in the hopeless predicament of Sisyphus; nor need we consider him to be happy. We are, however, in a context of ongoing moral challenge seeking our moral rapport with God for the sake of our character formation, even if we try to suppress this fact. In that rapport, God's moral character is revealed to humans in direct ways that intentionally challenge and encourage us toward good lives in our sharing of divine character traits.

This book's examination of value, duty, and meaning in human lives takes the following broad steps. The Introduction draws from Leo Tolstoy to give a concrete example of moral challenge and self-adaptation in finding meaning for human life. It suggests that we often share Tolstoy's kind of challenge in our moral experience to

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become morally better persons. Chapter 1 contends that persons as voluntary deciders typically have purposes (or intentions) for their decisions and broader actions, even if those purposes are subconscious and face dissonance in personal and social life. It identifies how some moral values revealed in moral conscience can offer worthy meaning for our lives, owing to their role in our becoming morally better as persons and in our personal relationships. Chapter 2 asks whether some moral values and duties that influence persons reveal to them, perhaps only with glimmers in conscience, personal character traits of a benevolent purpose-bearing God seeking to lead them to moral improvement and character formation. Even so, some people could fail to recognize such potentially veiled divine activity, owing to various reasons.

Chapter 3 considers that moral experience from a caring God would seek moral rapport with humans for the sake of an interactive cooperative relationship in righteousness. Such rapport would call for their loyal cooperation with God's moral will as expressed in their moral experience, including conscience. Chapter 4 examines a kind of moral inspiration of humans by God for the sake of reaching their deepest motives for decision and action. Such inspiration takes moral decision-making beyond a self-help program to an interpersonal contribution from God to be received with loyal cooperation by humans. Chapter 5 contends that moral experience and corresponding evidence from God do not depend on philosophical overlays of an abstract or speculative sort. It uses familiar Platonic, Thomist, and Kantian philosophical overlays to illustrate this lesson and to highlight the importance of direct moral experience of God's righteous character and will.

Chapter 6 explores whether becoming a co-valuer for divine goodness in conflict could bring lasting meaning not only to an individual life but also to the shared life of a society, including a society that flourishes with national, ethnic, racial, gender, and religious diversity. Such a society could benefit with goodness and meaning by its chosen reciprocity in reflecting (to some degree)

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a morally perfect God worthy of human worship and trust. Chapter 7 asks whether a perfectly good God could justify or vindicate God's ways of allowing and using severe suffering and evil in human moral experience and in the world. It looks for such a justification in divine promise and proximity that seek righteousness as rectitude fulfilled for humans in God's preferred time. Chapter 8 explores the relevance of moral experience to theological inquiry. It considers a potential divine concern for righteous intentions in inquirers about God.

Overall, the book explains the needed role of God in human moral experience and character for the sake of building a righteous, morally good commonwealth in moral rapport with God. It argues that this role enjoys distinctive but widely neglected support from evidence of intentional activity in human moral experience and character. We shall see that this evidence merits our careful attention if we aim to understand a vital divine purpose behind moral values and duties and that purpose's corresponding ethics for the common good. A potential result is a new appreciation of the profound significance of moral values and duties for the meaning of human life, individually and collectively, and in relation to God and intentional divine activity in human experience and moral character.

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