

THE HEBREW BIBLE AND METAETHICS: A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION

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Abstract

In the discipline of Biblical Ethics (Hebrew Bible) the concern lies with descriptive and normative ethics whereas questions pertaining to metaethics are frequently bracketed. As a result, very little attention has been paid to the semantic, epistemological and metaphysical assumptions underlying in the Hebrew Bible's moral discourse. In response to this state of affairs, this paper seeks to make a plea for the introduction of metaethics within the field of Biblical Ethics by demonstrating how this line of inquiry can be simultaneously philosophical and hermeneutically valid in terms of research problems, objectives and methodology. The study concludes with a cursive introduction to three interesting metaethical problems in connection with biblical assumptions regarding the divinity-morality relation when viewed from the perspective of the Euthyphro Dilemma, the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the question of morality and meaning in the divine condition.

Key Words: Hebrew Bible, Metaethics, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophical Analysis, Divinity and Morality

Introduction

The word 'ethics' – similar to the words 'theology,' 'history,' 'culture,' 'religion,' etc. – does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Of course, this does not mean that there was no conception of morality in ancient Israel. However, recognition of this pedantic truth may assist us in becoming more aware of the fact that we do not have in the Hebrew Bible any systematic philosophical reflection on biblical ethics. Perhaps for this reason, up to now scholarly discussions on ethics in the Hebrew Bible have been primarily concerned with what philosophers call *substantive* theories of morality, e.g. with *descriptive* ethics (i.e., giving a supposedly unbiased account of the Hebrew Bible's moral beliefs) and with *normative* ethics (i.e. classifying the contents of moral beliefs in the Hebrew Bible via *ethical theory* and discerning the intricate operations of its *applied ethics* in the reconstructed historical context) In doing so, however, issues related to *analytical* ethics (i.e., concerns with what moral philosophers call *metaethics*) have been neglected (Otto 1994; Barton 2003:45).

This fact is readily acknowledged – and it is not something recognised only in contemporary research. Almost three decades ago, Knight (1982:55) lamented that biblical scholars tend to limit their interests to rather specific, narrow topics, e.g. social justice, the status of women, war, vengeance, property rights, ecological concern for nature and the like. In his *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*, Otto (1994:21) pointed out that

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questions in metaethics are indeed seldom raised in the secondary literature. More recently, John Barton (2003:45) refers to the relative lack of interest in philosophical inquiry when he first started writing on the subject and which he ascribes to the influence of the *Biblical Theology Movement* and the residues of their dislike of anything that seemed too Hellenistic (cf Knierim 1995:492; Barr 1999:146-171) Indeed, to my knowledge, no-one has ever written a metaethics of the Hebrew Bible.

One of many possible reasons biblical for the bracketing of metaethical issues in the study of Biblical Ethics may be the fact that metaethics is more philosophical in orientation than other branches of ethics. The range of issues, puzzles and questions that fall within metaethics' purview are consistently abstract, thus inviting an attempt to analyse the meta-physical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice (Sayre-McCord 2008). As such, metaethics proper counts within its domain a broad range of questions and puzzles, including: Is morality more a matter of taste than truth? Are moral standards culturally relative? Are there moral facts? If there are moral facts, what is their origin? How is it that they set an appropriate standard for our behaviour? How might moral facts be related to other facts (about psychology, happiness, human conventions...)? And how do we learn about the moral facts, if there are any? These questions lead naturally to puzzles about the meaning of moral claims, as well as about moral truth and the justification of our moral commitments (Sayre-McCord 2008).

A metaethics of the Hebrew Bible would have to adopt many similar concerns but would be more historically and descriptively orientated, instead reflecting on the presuppositions and commitments evident in ancient Israel's substantive moral thought, talk, and practice, thus abstracting away from particular moral judgments. However, because this has never been done before to any extent suggesting that a metaethics of ancient Israelite religion should be considered as important as discussions on substantive morality in the Hebrew Bible, there currently exists a gap in the research on Biblical Ethics concerning the semantic, epistemological and metaphysical issues. Consequently, a number of metaethical questions await in-depth discussion:

- What was it assumed to mean to call something 'good' or 'evil'?
- What were assumed to be necessary or sufficient conditions for moral actions?
- Was was assumed to be essential and accidental properties of morality?
- What epistemological criteria were operative for determining morality?
- How were moral beliefs justified?
- What was the ontological status of specific moral claims assumed to be?

Given the reality of biblical-theological pluralism and the developments in the history of Israelite religion one cannot suppose that texts in the Hebrew Bible all offer an answer to each of the questions we may put to it, that there will be only one answer to each question with reference to all the Hebrew Bible traditions, or that if there are answers that these will necessarily cohere with what Christian philosophers of religion would consider credible or orthodox in view of current philosophical theological fashions (Gericke 2006b:677-699)

In other words, the Hebrew Bible is not a textbook whose authors were concerned with offering us a systematic moral philosophy. However, one would commit the fallacy of *non-sequitur* reasoning if the absence of explicit metaethical reflection in the Hebrew Bible is taken to mean that the texts offer no metaethical data to work with. On a-priori grounds the availability of such data is guaranteed in as much as all moral discourse *ipso facto* contains

scores of covert metaethical *assumptions*. It is these assumptions that will be the concern of metaethical inquiry.

In the context of biblical studies, however, any philosophy of religion focused on ancient Israelite religion should not bracket the history of religion (Gericke 2007:684). A hermeneutically legitimate and heuristically functional philosophical inquiry will therefore not involve looking for philosophy in the Hebrew Bible or attempt to construct a coherent contemporary philosophical system from it (Carroll 1991:27). However, while there is no philosophy in the Hebrew Bible, its metaethical assumptions themselves necessarily include taken-for-granted semantic, epistemological and metaphysical *presuppositions* and it is these presuppositions that will be the focus of a historical and descriptive form of philosophical *analysis* (on which, see Jackson 1998). Being analytical and phenomenological in orientation such a philosophical inquiry should not be confused with roping the text in the service of Jewish/Christian philosophical theology but will instead be aimed at making explicit in non-distortive philosophical terms what went without saying in the Hebrew Bible about the nature of the morality. This means that any comprehensive philosophical approach to the metaethics of the Hebrew Bible will be constituted by three components already alluded to.

- A *semantic* component aimed at, *inter alia*, determining whether the moral assumptions in the Hebrew Bible presuppose descriptivism and/or non-descriptivism. That is, one should ask whether the Hebrew Bible contains prescriptive language (including ethical commands and duties) as a subdivision of descriptive language (and as having meaning in virtue of the same kind of properties as descriptive propositions do), and/or whether its ethical propositions were assumed to be irreducible in the sense that their meaning was not believed to be explicated sufficiently in terms of truth-conditions.
- An *epistemological* component that will involve, *inter alia*, deciding whether cognitivism and/or non-cognitivism were presupposed in the Hebrew Bible's metaethical assumptions. In doing so it should address the question of whether and to what extent moral discourse in the Hebrew Bible was understood as attempting to reach beyond the scope of human cognition or whether the texts purport to be concerned with action rather than with knowledge. In other words, were the moralities encountered in the text essentially concerned with judgments of the same kind as knowledge judgments; namely about matters of fact – or not?
- The *ontological* component which will have to decide whether moral realism and/or non-realism were operative. The focus will be on the Hebrew Bible's ideas about value-bearing properties, i.e. the kind of things that were assumed to correspond to, or be referred to, by ethical propositions. A non-descriptivist and non-cognitivist perspective, if operative in the Hebrew Bible, would have assumed that ethics do not require a specific ontology, since ethical propositions do not refer to objects in the same way that descriptive propositions do (which would mean its ontology was anti-realist). If, however, the Hebrew Bible presupposes realism we need to explain what kind of entities, properties or states the Hebrew Bible assumes to be relevant for ethics, and why they were believed to have the normative status characteristic of ethics.

As should be readily apparent, these components involve an adaptation of counterparts in metaethics proper so as to be suitable for use in the context of the study of the ethics of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, since no one has ever written a metaethics of the Hebrew Bible and there is no tradition of directly related philosophical research to fall back on, it might

be prudent (or not) to devote the remainder of the paper to a cursive introduction to a few of the stranger types of metaethical problems that could merit further research and future discussion. In line with the objectives of this paper, I offer neither answers nor solutions but only a provocative and controversial perspective on a particular problematic, thus hoping to stimulate future debates on the issues involved.

Neglected Metaethical Issues

The Divinity-morality Relation

Despite the fact that no one has ever written a metaethics of ancient Israelite religion, there seems to exist a popular consensus involving the belief that the Hebrew Bible by default presents us with a historical precursor to what nowadays is known in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion as ‘Divine Command Theory’ (on which, see Adams 1987, Alston 1989, 1990:303-326, Arthur 2005:15-23, Audi & Wainwright 1986, Copan 2003:295-304, Hare 1997, Kant 1993, Kierkegaard 1985, Kretzmann 1983, Leibniz 1951 Mackie 1977, Morris 1987, 1991, Morrision 2001:127-138, Murphy 1998:3-27, Mouw 1970:61-66, 1990, Nielsen 1973, Quinn 1987;1979:305-325 Stump 2001:530-550, Wainwright 2005, Wierenga 2003:387-407, 1989, Zagzebski 2004, Hare 2008 et al)

Not that biblical scholars classify the divinity-morality relation in the text with the concept of Divine Command Theory – it’s just that in their theological claims they seem to imply that in ancient Israelite religion the divine will was assumed to be the ultimate foundation of morality, i.e. that human actions were considered morally good if and only if Yhwh willed or commanded them (cf. Otto 1994: passim; Davies 2000:20). Hence one typically encounters prominent biblical theologians over the past 50 years insinuating that Yhwh and the moral order were inextricably related.

“The power of the good rests entirely on the recognition of God as the one who is good. Of moral behaviour for the sake of an abstract good there is none” (Eichrodt 1967:316).

“The ancient people, like many today, would not be prone to distinguish sharply between morality and religion. What is morally right to do is so because God wills it or because it is consistent with the divinely ordained structure of the world” (Knight 1982:55).

“Also, the Old Testament is not familiar with the concept of doing good for the sake of the good; rather it is Yhwh’s will that lays claim to human lives. Fixed orders are established by Yhwh” (Preuss 1992:191).

“To say that ethical obligation is obedience to the will of the national God, is to say that it is not the observation of...universal human norms” (Barton 2003:46).

Interestingly, many philosophers of religion (both theistic and atheistic) have uncritically followed suit and take it for granted that the historical precursor to Judeo-Christian versions of Divine Command Theory is the Hebrew Bible itself (e.g., Quinn 1987; 1979:305-325 Stump 2001:530-550, Hare 2008, *et al*). Many introductory discussions on Divine Command Theory assume as much and even offer as illustration references to texts in the Hebrew Bible in which moral norms are apparently acquired solely via divine commands, e.g. the giving of the Ten Commandments. Strong arguments for the presence of Divine Command Theory in the text include the issuing of seemingly non-necessary commands (as to Adam and Eve or the rituals of Leviticus) and even seemingly immoral commands (e.g. the commanding of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, that the Israelites plunder the Egyptians, the

slaughtering of the Canaanites, Hosea being told to marry a prostitute, etc; see Kretzmann 1983; Quinn 1987, Hare 2008, *et al*).

In philosophical terms the idea that the metaethical assumptions of the Hebrew Bible presuppose Divine-Command Theory, is actually saying that in ancient Israelite religion the divinity-morality relation that was taken for granted presupposed a subjectivist yet universalist form of cognitivism to be contrasted with other forms of ethical subjectivism (e.g. ideal observer theory, moral relativism, and individualist ethical subjectivism), moral realism (which claims that moral propositions refer to objective facts, independent of anyone's attitudes or opinions), error theory (which denies that any moral propositions are true in any sense), and non-cognitivism (which denies that moral sentences express propositions at all).

That the Hebrew Bible associates the right actions with what finds favour in the eyes of Yhwh cannot reasonably be denied. However, as Wierenga (1989:215) implied, there is more than one way of interpreting the divinity-morality relation even given Divine Command Theory (hence strong and weak versions of the theory). This is also readily apparent from any attempt to answer Socrates' question to Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue (1981) which was subsequently adapted to become what is now called the 'Euthyphro Dilemma' (see Matthews 1995:253). In the context of the Hebrew Bible it involves the following riddle:

Did Yhwh command something because it is moral, or was something moral because it was commanded by Yhwh?

Due to the problems both of the possible responses implied in this question are said to raise for Divine Command Theory (e.g. moral relativism or redundant divine revelation) much has been written in an attempt to respond to the dilemma within the context of Christian philosophy of religion (see the discussions in Quinn 1979; Helm 1981; Kretzmann 1983; Wierenga; Wainright 2005; Frame 2007). Curiously, however, I could not find any corresponding concern in Biblical Ethics in which someone tried to establish what a given text in the Hebrew Bible might imply in response to Euthyphro's Dilemma. Consequently, I would suggest two questions for any future research on the divinity-morality relation to the paramount:

1. Is Divine Command Theory the only or default metaethical perspective on the relation between divinity and morality in the Hebrew Bible?
2. Do some texts in the Hebrew Bible offer us any hints as to which (if any) of the two possible options presented by Euthyphro's Dilemma they imply to be correct?

In this regard, the Hebrew Bible might very well contain texts, the metaethical assumptions of which imply different possible responses to the question of the relation between Yhwh and moral order. Moreover, since the metatheistic assumptions with reference to which these metaethical assumptions are operative involve a pre-philosophical view of the nature of divinity, chances are that in the context of the Hebrew Bible the Euthyphro Dilemma might well represent a pseudo-problem in that in the context of some texts it could be presenting a false dilemma.

Divinity-humanity Relations and the Principle of Sufficient Reason

A second related neglected metaethical concern not given its due in current and past research on ethics in the Hebrew Bible, is the metaethical assumptions regarding the rationale for the particular divinity-humanity relation assumed to be required by the moral order. In the discussion to follow in this section, my query is inspired by the strange audacity of

David J. A. Clines in his *Interested Parties, The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* and *What does Eve do to help and other readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (see Clines 1990, 1995). And I begin by noting that The Hebrew Bible itself assumed that Yhwh is to be worshipped and that most studies on the ethics of the Hebrew Bible takes this for granted without batting an eyelid. In view of this, I would suggest that there are basic (postmodern) readerly questions invited by what goes without saying which are so elementary that they have never been discussed philosophically by biblical scholars, e.g.:

1. Why, according to the Hebrew Bible, does Yhwh demand to be worshipped?
2. Why, according to the Hebrew Bible, does Yhwh demand to be feared?
3. Why, according to the Hebrew Bible, does Yhwh demand to be served?

These questions are invited by the data itself as there is no logical necessity (as opposed to a theological one, perhaps) that Yhwh should be thought to want to relate to humans in this manner. Hence it follows that there must have been assumed to be adequate grounds for why the deity wanted to view these elements in their relation to the people. The actual justification for holding to the beliefs is probably taken for granted in view of their age in the history of religion and may be reformulated according to what metaphysicians call the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* (cf. Smith 1995:97-106). Adapted for the study of the metaethical assumptions on the divinity-humanity relations, it involves several axioms:

1. For every divine requirement x, if x is assumed to exist, then there was assumed to be a sufficient reason why x was assumed to exist
2. For every divine moral view e, if e was assumed to exist, then there was assumed to be a sufficient reason why e was assumed to exist.
3. For every ethical proposition p, if p was assumed to be true, then there was assumed to be a sufficient reason why p was assumed to be true.

These sufficient reasons must have been operative when it was implied that the deity desires to be worshipped, to be feared and to rule. The question is, what were they?

To be sure, answers to the above questions might not be overt and explicit in the Hebrew Bible and are likely to be found only on the level of taken-for-granted metaethical assumptions. However, while answers from the history of religion and from biblical theology are not outstanding, in the philosophical reconstruction of sufficient reasons our task is not concluded if we limit ourselves to genetic (aetiological) or evaluative (apologetic or (a)theological) explanations. For in striving to provide a philosophical account of sufficient reason we are not concerned with giving a naturalist account or social-psychological reconstruction of what we today might think the reasons were as to why the ancient Israelites thought such and so. Rather, we are concerned with philosophical reflection on what the texts of the Hebrew Bible themselves presupposed with regard to why the idea that Yhwh demands worship could go without saying (the phenomenological aspect of our inquiry). This is why the obvious historical and sociological answers won't do and why the apologetic response claiming that Yhwh does not demand worship but that it was a spontaneous expression of human spirituality both miss the point and distort the texts' own assumptions.

In view of the above, any objection to biblical scholars asking these questions claiming them to be anachronistic confuses philosophical inquiry with theological explication. Moreover, this objection also confuses taking something for granted with people not being interested in it – the two are not the same. Given that the bulk of the Hebrew Bible

concerns prescriptive material regulating the worship of Yhwh, the idea that there was no interest in the matter seems unwarranted. Just because the biblical authors neither ask nor answer the philosophical questions in so many words does not mean that the texts of the Hebrew Bible contain no presuppositions or implied ideas related to the matter.

Moreover, if consistently applied, trying to avoid having anachronistic concerns would also mean the end of all our linguistic, literary, historical, sociological and theological inquiries, all of which ask questions none of which the biblical authors themselves show any concern with. Hence there is the suspicion that it may be the modern detractors who are anachronistic in their hermeneutical objections. Surely it is only in view of certain philosophical theological presuppositions about the nature of divinity (and about what is proper for a contemporary credible deity) and its relation to humanity that these questions seem inappropriate and conceptually flawed (or category mistakes). Ergo, the motive for the objection to the asking of these kinds of questions, has little to do with a concern for philosophy not dealing in distortive anachronistic issues but rather stems from motives that are essentially dogmatic and ideological. Perhaps there is the latent fear that a philosophical inquiry might uncover hopelessly crude and all-too-human answers in the Hebrew Bible which could be an embarrassment to those philosophical-theological conceptions of the divine which claims to be 'biblical' yet which are, in fact, nothing of the sort.

Morality and Meaning in the Divine Condition

A third and final issue that warrants current attention as prolegomena to further research, concerns the metaphysical problem of divine morality and meaning. Past studies related to the Hebrew Bible's assumptions regarding the meaning of human existence are rare as it is – one will look in vain for anyone perplexed as to what the Hebrew Bible presupposed about the purpose of Yhwh's own life. Hence the question of what the texts of the Hebrew Bible assumes (if anything) about what gave meaning to the divine moral actions, has not been given its due. Even in philosophy proper the notion of the assumed meaning of divine existence is never part of the existential discussion (see Baggini 2004; Belliotti 2001, Cottingham 2003; Martin 2002; Thomson 2003; Young 2003).

To be sure, the whole notion of wondering about the meaning of divine as opposed to human existence may again seem anachronistic and too philosophically abstract. Yet the fact of the matter is that if Yhwh was assumed to have plans and reasons for doing what he did (and was assumed to be able to do whatever he liked, to a certain extent) then it follows that what Yhwh does in fact do, how Yhwh feels about his plans being realized or foiled, or what Yhwh expects from moral agents relating to him imply answers to the question of what the Hebrew Bible text wittingly or unwittingly assumed to be what gave meaning and purpose to Yhwh's own existence. So we are perfectly justified to ask what the Hebrew Bible assumed about what seemed to provide meaning and purpose to Yhwh's own existence.

In this regard, consider (once more) a few seemingly very odd questions:

1. Why did Yhwh create moral agents?
2. Why does Yhwh intervene so haphazardly in maintaining the moral order?
3. Why did Yhwh reveal moral requirements so rarely and selectively?
4. Why did Yhwh have to communicate certain commands so obscurely (dreams)?
5. Why did Yhwh want to make a covenant?
6. Why did Yhwh want to cleanse moral guilt via sacrifices?

7. Why did Yhwh find human physiological processes offensive?
8. Why did Yhwh create animals he wants Israel to consider abominations?
9. Why did Yhwh not want images of himself? Etc.

One answer may be because Yhwh was assumed to find doing such and so meaningful. But the question then is again – why? Why these and not other things?

Again these questions, like those discussed in the previous section, are perfectly warranted – being invited by the texts themselves and presupposing the principle of sufficient reason. Again the reason as to why they are neither asked nor answered is because the related ideas were assumed to be common knowledge that could be taken for granted – not because there was no conception related to the matter, or no concern with the particular rationale for the belief in question. Hence any actual explanation or discussion of these matters by the biblical authors themselves would have been considered superfluous. This means that it is in fact we with our anachronistic philosophical-theological assumptions that stumble over such issues and, fearing what crude notions might have sufficed, would like to suggest that the questions are hermeneutically illegitimate.

For example, proof of the above claims are found in the history of belief revision in ancient Israel and in view of the fact that all the ideas concerning creation, revelation, sacrifice, aniconism, food taboos, etc had a contingent history within the storylines attested within the Hebrew Bible. As is evident from studies such as those of Alberts (1992) there are traditions in the Hebrew Bible from a time before certain of the ideas in the questions above were associated with Yhwh, a time when they were introduced, a development and reinterpretation over time and finally often a discarding of what for centuries had been taken for granted as the absolute truth (e.g. the denial of the sacrificial cult being early, in Jer 7:22; Am 5:25). This fluidity and contingency of associations of Yhwh with these issues suggest that there must have been some reflection going on that would explain why the ideas were taken up, developed and dropped. Hence the questions above are something invited by a critical-historical study of the Hebrew Bible itself.

The philosophical question now is how the related divine acts were assumed to provide meaning to the divine existence. If the meaning is related to the divine will, another philosophical question would be to what extent Yhwh was assumed to have free will in his decision to be related to Israel in this manner. For it seems that qua deity Yhwh was assumed to be engaging in ‘innate’ or ‘instinctive’ divine behaviour – he was acting out a stereotype attributed throughout the ancient Near East to any entity participating in ‘the divine condition’ (cf. ‘the human condition’). After all, for all his idiosyncrasies, in terms of certain basic properties, functions and relations, Yhwh was believed to act as all Iron Age gods do in terms of his basic actions (see Miller 2000:10). Does this mean that Yhwh was assumed to have no choice but to fulfil stereotypical divine roles such as creating, relating, revealing, blessing, cursing, saving, destroying, etc. In short, was Yhwh assumed to be a slave to his divine nature? If so, in what sense was Yhwh as moral agent assumed to have free will?

These are the kind questions a philosophical approach to the metaethical assumptions of ancient Israelite religion might wish to attend to. Then again, maybe these are precisely those questions that will continue to be avoided. Whatever the case may be, let it not be said that they have not been taken cognisance of.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to provide some sort of pioneering request that biblical scholars should incorporate metaethics in their discussion of Biblical Ethics. Up to now, metaethical discussion has been inadvertent and not an exclusive concern as part of an in-depth study. It is hoped that by way of a provocative if not completely over-the-top sort of introduction to some of the many possible issues that could be up for discussion, this paper will contribute in some way to the introduction of metaethical inquiry in the near future. Whether this will happen and what exactly will be on the agenda, I do not wish to be prescriptive about. What I do wish to do is to point out that the possibilities for doing metaethics are endless and that the limits of the subject are nothing more than the limits of our own imagination.

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