Synthesis for Further Discussion

Petri Luomanen

The commentaries at the end of the three main parts of the book have already provided cross-disciplinary summaries and reviews. There is no need to summarize those discussions here. As an overall conclusion it is more appropriate to try to summarize how the book answers the core question that was raised in the introduction: What, if any, is the role of religion, especially Christianity, in morality, pro-social behavior, and altruism? Furthermore, when all the articles and commentaries are viewed together, some recurrent themes and interesting links across the main parts emerge.

In practice, contributions in this volume mostly deal with religion and religious communities in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Thus, the results cannot necessarily be generalized to cover all religions. However, there are some cross-cultural aspects in the discussion, especially when it includes cognitive considerations. Therefore, I am occasionally speaking of “religion” in the following, but the reader is advised to keep in mind the restricted perspective of the volume.

Although the contributors and commentators approach the topic from diverse disciplinary areas with their own specific methodological traditions and discourses typical of their disciplines, they are practically unanimous in maintaining that morality does not necessarily require religion. Religiously unaffiliated persons or atheists are also capable of solving moral problems and pursuing moral goals. In some areas they may be even better tuned for seeing moral obligations or perceiving injustice than members of religious communities. In Nancy Ammerman’s research religious toleration and concern for nature came up as examples of that kind of orientation. Heikki Räisänen takes up the case of Stoics as a possible example of ethical universalism that exceeds the ethical universalism in early Christian sources where universalism seems to be restricted by in-group concerns.

However, this does not mean that morality and pro-social behavior could not benefit from religion. Several articles in the volume argue for ways in which this could happen and some even bring forth cases where this seems to be empirically verifiable.

Ammerman’s research shows that in the North-American cultural context those who participate in religious activities (informants included Christians, Jews, and Mormons), “have a fuller vocabulary of moral concerns and a more active engagement in pursuing those concerns, as compared to non-participants.” Persons un- or disaffiliated with North-American religious
communities also have moral concerns but they are more likely to approach moral problems from a more general structural and political point of view. They are also more likely to feel powerless in the face of moral problems, lacking the kind of infrastructure for voluntary service activities that members of religious congregations possess. Grace Davie cites in her commentary article similar results from Robin Gill’s research in British context. These empirical studies bring us to the first possible effect of religion on morality: (1) The significance of religion, or better, religious communities for morality is their ability to cultivate moral thinking and to enable voluntary pro-social service.

If Ammerman’s conclusion about the “fuller vocabulary of moral concerns” of members of religious communities is valid, the result reinforces the role Ilkka Pyysiäinen attributes to religion in moral considerations: “Religion only provides a cognitively effective way of explaining our moral intuitions to ourselves and to expressing them.” However, Ammerman’s conclusions go even further because religion also seems to boost pro-social activity. This brings to mind James’ pragmatism, as presented in Pihlström’s article, the “energizing of moral life” which would provide a practical justification for theism—although the kind of energizing that is exemplified in Ammerman’s research data probably has more to do with social interaction than preoccupation with theistic beliefs, which actually brings us closer to Deweyan pragmatism. In any case, because religion is not a prerequisite for morality, empirical data leaves room for the kind of pragmatist philosophical solutions discussed in Pihlström’s article.

The reasonable philosophical solution that takes into account empirical evidence has to be sought in moral religion or ethical theology rather than religious morality or theological ethics—or in “mutual holistic adjustment, with no one-way grounding either way” as Philström suggests. The idea of natural moral law that appears in different forms in traditional Catholic and Protestant theologies is, of course, also compatible with this, as is also pointed out in the commentaries of Knuuttila and Saarinen.

In my view, John Dewey’s naturalized pragmatism and even Richard Rorty’s neopragmatist philosophy partly accord with Gerd Theissen whose delineation of evolutionary theology I discuss in my own article. Theissen defines evolutionary epistemology, which also covers religious knowledge, as follows:

Evolutionary epistemology regards the hypothesis of human knowledge as a continuation of that comprehensive process of adaptation of life to reality which governs all organic structures. Knowledge is the adaptation of cognitive structures to reality, the accommodation of thought to experience. Conversely: life forms knowledge.1

1 See above pp. 124–25.