

Euthyphro Dilemma

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The Euthyphro Dilemma is named after a particular exchange between Socrates and Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. In a famous passage, Socrates asks, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato 1981: 10a), and proceeds to advance arguments which clearly favor the first of these two options (*see* PLATO). The primary interest in the Euthyphro Dilemma over the years, however, has primarily concerned the relationship between God and morality in the monotheistic religious tradition, where God is taken to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, having created the universe initially and still actively involved in it today. But as we will see at the end of this entry, there has also been a recent surge of interest in a version of the Dilemma which applies to so-called response-dependent accounts of normative properties in meta-ethics.

According to the meta-ethical position known as theological voluntarism, God is the basis for all or at least some crucial part of morality. Such a view can take a number of forms (*see* Quinn 2001 for an overview). It can be stated as a semantic claim about what we mean when we use moral language, or as a metaphysical dependence claim whereby moral facts and properties are grounded in some way in God. Similarly, different claims are made about what it is specifically about God that is supposed to be doing the grounding, with God's commands being the traditional option advocated by divine command theorists (*see* DIVINE COMMAND). However, recent alternative proposals have focused on God's intentions (Murphy 1998; Quinn

2001), God's desires (Miller 2009), or God's emotions (Zagzebski 2004) as the metaphysical basis for moral facts.

The Euthyphro Dilemma can be applied to all these different versions of theological voluntarism. But to simplify the discussion, we will focus on a simple version of divine command theory, according to which all and only deontological moral obligations are metaphysically grounded in God's actual commands. Hence if God commands Jones to donate to charity at a certain time, then on this view Jones is morally obligated to donate to charity at that time. Furthermore, what makes this action obligatory is precisely the fact that God has commanded Jones to do so. With this particular version of divine command theory in mind, we can recast Socrates' two alternative positions as follows:

- (i) *First Horn*: Suppose God's commands are what make human actions morally obligatory, permissible, or wrong.
- (ii) *Second Horn*: Suppose human actions are objectively morally obligatory, permissible, or wrong independently of God's commands, and when God does issue morally relevant commands, he does so on the basis of previously knowing that the actions have this moral status.

Let us start with the Second Horn. Some theists worry that such a claim would compromise certain traditional properties of God, such as his omnipotence or his sovereignty (for an overview, see Wainwright 2005). But the more immediate point to make about the Second Horn is that it simply contradicts the fundamental idea of divine command theory and, once suitably generalized, theological voluntarism as a whole. Voluntarists about deontological properties insist that the dependence relation between God and obligation runs in the opposite direction, since on their view it is God who, so to speak, sets in place the obligatory status of actions. So

voluntarists seem forced to adopt the First Horn, and, according to advocates of the Euthyphro Dilemma, are thereby saddled with a new set of difficulties.

Exactly what those difficulties are has never been consistently stated in the literature, but we can label the three leading candidates in discussions of the Euthyphro Dilemma as: *the divine goodness objection*, *the anything goes objection*, and *the arbitrariness objection*.

The Divine Goodness Objection. According to the First Horn, all or a significant part of morality is based on God's commands. But then we cannot make sense of God's own normative properties (Alston 1989: 255; Timmons 2002: 29). For instance, all theists claim that God is good, but to say that God is good because God commands that he is good is clearly to get things backwards. God is essentially good as part of his nature, and so is good prior to making any commands in the first place.

A now standard reply to this objection is to restrict the scope of the voluntarist's grounding claim from all normative properties to just some central part of morality. For instance, we saw above a version of divine command theory which only grounds deontological properties in God's commands. A separate account would then have to be provided for axiological properties such as goodness and badness. Robert Adams has worked out just such a restricted version of voluntarism in detail in his *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Adams 1999; see also Alston 1989: 256-66, 268-73).

The Anything Goes Objection. Returning to our simple divine command theory, if God's commands are what make human actions morally obligatory, then a natural fear is that what seem to us to be horrific actions could become morally obligatory if God were to command them.

Philip Quinn, one of the leading contemporary voluntarists, provides a nice illustration of this worry:

- (iii) If God were [to command] that someone at some time bring about the torture to death of an innocent child, then it would be morally obligatory for that person at that time to bring about the torture to death of an innocent child (Quinn 2001: 70; see also Quinn 1978: 58-61).

And yet, surely it would *not* be morally obligatory to torture to death an innocent child, and thus so much the worse for any voluntarist view which accepts the First Horn and bases even part of morality on God's commands (or, alternatively, on properties of his will).

Here too something of a consensus strategy has emerged amongst voluntarists in responding to the anything goes objection (Wierenga 1983: 393-6; Alston 1989: 267; Sullivan 1993: 35; Quinn 2001: 70-1). Quinn, for instance, cites the commonly held theistic belief that God is essentially just, and therefore there is no possible world in which God would issue such a command to torture to death an innocent child (Quinn 2001: 70). Similarly, Adams ties his version of divine command theory to the commands of a loving God, and presumably there is no possible world in which a loving God would issue such a command (Adams 1999: 250). Hence it follows on either proposal that there is no world in which torturing to death an innocent child is obligatory. At the same time, voluntarists can still maintain that (iii) is true because it has an impossible antecedent, and on the standard way of thinking about counterfactual conditionals with impossible antecedents, they turn out to be trivially true.

This response could give rise to the concern that there are features of torturing an innocent child which serve both as God's reasons for taking this practice to be incompatible with

his justice, and also as the basis for an objective moral standard apart from God. Such a concern naturally takes us to the third objection commonly associated with the First Horn.

The Arbitrariness Objection. Perhaps the most serious problem that is supposed to arise with the First Horn is the arbitrariness objection, which itself can be formulated in terms of a dilemma. Suppose, on the one hand, that the voluntarist maintains that God's commands (or intentions, desires, etc.) are made for no reason whatsoever. Then his commands, and hence the morality which is supposed to be based on them, would be perfectly arbitrary. And not only is it a serious cost for any meta-ethical view if it implies that morality is perfectly arbitrary, but in this particular case such a consequence would also conflict with God's nature as a perfectly rational being who always acts for good reasons.

Suppose, then, on the other hand the voluntarist maintains that God's commands (or intentions, desires, etc.) are formed for reasons. Then those reasons in turn must appeal to an independent morality which exists apart from God. And if there is such an independent morality apart from God, we are back to the Second Horn, and theological voluntarism is once again abandoned (Timmons 2002: 29-30; Kawall 2005: 110).

Voluntarists tend to adopt the second horn of this dilemma and claim that God's commands are based on reasons and hence are not arbitrary, but they also deny that the reasons must appeal in any way to an independent morality. Rather, the reasons can be non-moral considerations ultimately based in God's nature. For instance, suppose God commands that we not torture innocent children. Then according to our simple divine command theory, God's command makes such actions wrong. The command in turn could be based on various considerations, such as this one: torturing innocent children is not loving and indeed is

incompatible with love. This consideration does not obviously entail anything involving an independent morality. Rather it becomes a relevant consideration in God's mind and one that counts against the practice of torturing innocent children, precisely because God's nature itself is one of perfect love. Thus the reason-giving force of this consideration is grounded in God's nature, rather than in an independent morality apart from God. So, according to this response, God's commands can be based in reasons while still serving as the metaphysical basis for the relevant moral facts (for additional discussion, see Alston 1989: 267; Audi 2007: 123-7; Miller 2009).

The arbitrariness objection can be recast in a different way, however (Brody 1974; Quinn 1978: 49; Wierenga 1983: 401; Sullivan 1993; Miller 2009). Divine command theories typically hold that actions acquire their moral status *because* of God's commands, or *in virtue of* his commanding, or that their obligatory status *consists* in their being commanded by God. Similar claims apply to other versions of voluntarism which base moral facts on features of God's will, such as his desires, intentions, emotions, or the like. But if we say that God's commands are not arbitrary and instead are based on reasons, then regardless of whether those reasons in turn appeal to an independent morality or just stem from God's nature, the critic can argue that it is the *reasons themselves* which become the basis for the relevant part of morality, rather than anything about God's commands or will. Furthermore, those reasons need have nothing to do with God at all – they can include considerations such as the action's being *loving*, *painful*, or *forgiving*. So not only does theological voluntarism but God in general seem to have dropped out of the moral picture in an effect to prevent the relevant part of morality from being arbitrary.

Here we can only sketch one brief response that might be made to this revised version of the arbitrariness objection. Perhaps the voluntarist could argue that the reasons in question *alone*

are not sufficient for grounding the obligatory status of an action, and that God's commands play an essential additional role. This would make sense if the reasons are only *prima facie* reasons, and can often conflict. Indeed, the number of reasons pertaining to the different possible actions an agent could perform in a given set of circumstances might be vast, and we need not assume that God simply weighs together all of their valences and strengths as part of a simple overall calculation. In fact, given recent work on different conceptions of reasons for action – including pure justificatory reasons, incommensurable reasons, exclusionary reasons, and equally strong opposing reasons - we should assume just the opposite (*see* REASONS; REASONS FOR ACTION, MORALITY AND). So by forming a command (or an intention, desire, or so forth depending on the version of voluntarism in question), God thereby comes to a conclusion and resolves the conflict decisively in favor of one particular action. Hence the obligatory status of the action would still consist in its being commanded by God, even though various reasons played an important part in the motivational and causal process which led to the formation of the command (for additional responses and related discussion, see Quinn 1978: 49-52; Audi 2007; Miller 2009; and especially Sullivan 1993).

It is important to end by noting that Socrates' two options and the issues to which they give rise, are not only of interest today in discussions of theological voluntarism, but rather appear throughout contemporary meta-ethics. Here is one brief illustration. According to many versions of constructivism, morality is grounded in the responses of a certain set of agents (*see* CONSTRUCTIVISM, MORAL). Russ Shafer-Landau has formulated a dilemma against such constructivists as follows (2003: 41-43). If the constraints used in specifying the set of agents appeal to moral standards, then the constructivist will be covertly employing moral principles

which exist independently of the construction process, which (similar to the First Horn) contradicts the fundamental goal of constructivism to reject such principles. If, on the other hand, the constraints do not include any moral standards, then the moral principles which emerge from the responses of such agents likely could be seriously out of line with our deepest moral commitments (similar to the anything goes objection). Either way, then, the constructivist faces a kind of Euthyphro Dilemma.

Similar options can be outlined for other meta-ethical views such as Michael Smith's account of normative reasons:

- (iv) S has a normative reason to do x in C if and only if S's fully rational counterpart would desire S to do x in C (1994: chapter five).

Or consider David Lewis' dispositional account of value:

- (v) X is a value if and only if we would be disposed to value x under conditions of the fullest imaginative acquaintance with X (1989).

Numerous other examples of response-dependent accounts (*see* RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES) could also be mentioned, but what all these views seem to have in common is a commitment to something like the following version of the basic equation (Wright 1992; Johnston 1993):

- (B) X is [moral term] if and only if X tends to elicit [response] from [respondents] in [circumstances].

where the class of respondents and circumstances is taken to be ideally suited to the kind of moral phenomenon at issue.

In the words of Mark Johnston, such biconditionals can be given either a left-to-right 'detectivist' reading or a right-to-left 'projectivist' reading (terms attributed to Johnston by Wright, 1992: 108). A detectivist reading, according to which the relevant respondents come to have the responses they do *because* the thing in question is morally good or right, gives rise to the First Horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma and so to a realist meta-ethic (*see* REALISM,

MORAL). However, it is the opposite projectivist reading that is intended by advocates of most response-dependent views, thereby leading to the concerns associated with the Second Horn (for additional discussion, see, Wright 1992; Johnston 1993).

The Euthyphro Dilemma is unlikely to disappear from either secular or religious meta-ethical discussions anytime soon.

SEE ALSO: CONSTRUCTIVISM, MORAL; DIVINE COMMAND; PLATO; REALISM, MORAL; REASONS; REASONS FOR ACTING, MORALITY AND; RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES.

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