

The Euthyphro dilemma¹

What is the relationship between God and morality? Is morality something independent of God or is morality whatever God wills it to be? Can God make right be wrong, or good bad, or not? The answer, it seems, must be one of the following two options:

1. Morality is independent of what God wills. To be good, God's will must conform to something independent of God. God wills what is morally right because it is right.
2. Morality is whatever God wills. What is morally right is right because God wills it.

There are reasons to think that, assuming a traditional Christian concept of God as both omnipotent and morally good, neither answer is satisfactory, creating a dilemma. If (1) is correct, then we place a constraint on God. God would no longer be omnipotent, because God cannot turn wrong into right. But if (2) is correct, then God can change wrong into right by an act of will. For example, if murdering babies were commanded by God, then it would be morally right of us to murder babies. This violates our sense of morality.

If neither answer is satisfactory, but logically, the relationship between God and morality must be either (1) or (2), then we may question whether our concept of God is coherent (assuming our concept of morality is coherent). In this handout, we discuss this dilemma and the challenge it poses to thinking coherently about God.

PLATO'S DILEMMA

The debate derives from a discussion of a closely related issue in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. In his dialogue, Plato considered the question 'what is piety?' Is piety doing whatever the gods want or do the gods want what is pious? Our version is different in two respects. First, it substitutes 'morality' for 'piety' and the classical monotheistic concept of God for Plato's 'gods'. Second, Euthyphro's dilemma also focuses more on the difficulty of defining what piety is without circularity; our dilemma is more about the coherence of the concept of God in relation to morality.

In response to Socrates' questioning, Euthyphro's first formal definition of piety is 'that which is dear to the gods' or again 'what the gods love'. Socrates then asks whether something - an action, say - is pious because it is loved by the gods, or

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 41-8

whether the gods love the action because it is pious. Euthyphro's definition is ambiguous. Which of these two does it mean?

Euthyphro answers that the gods love what is pious because it is pious. This makes piety independent of the gods' love - it would count as piety whether or not the gods loved it. It is pious and so the gods love it. That some action is dear to the gods doesn't make something an act of piety. If they love pious actions because they are pious, there must be something that qualifies them as pious independent of the gods' love.

Socrates objects that this can't be right. Whatever 'is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them, not loved by them because it is dear to them'. Since piety is dear to the gods, it must be dear to them because they love it. Curiously, Plato doesn't support this objection with any arguments. The thought is that what the gods value, they value because they love that thing. To accept this means accepting that their piety isn't a reason for the gods loving what they do. Why do the gods love certain actions? Whatever the answer, it isn't piety. An action qualifies as pious simply because the gods' love it. On this view, if the gods love something, doing that thing - whatever it is - is pious.

But suppose we persist in the face of this objection, and agree with Euthyphro that piety is independent of what the gods love. Then what is it? Euthyphro suggests it is justice in relation to the gods. But what is it to treat the gods justly? It is to please them in prayers and sacrifices. This doesn't bring them any benefit; it simply pleases them. But now, piety = justice = what is pleasing to the gods. And so, objects Socrates, piety once more becomes whatever pleases the gods - what is pious is pious because the gods love it. They happen to love prayers and sacrifices, and so these actions become pious. Euthyphro has found it impossible to say what piety is, independent of what the gods love.

OMNIPOTENCE AND MORALITY

Having looked at the origin of the Euthyphro dilemma, we return to our version of it. On our best understandings of God and morality, should we think of morality as dependent on God or as independent of God? (The discussion assumes that morality is not a matter of purely subjective human responses. If God exists and is supremely good, then this assumption is reasonable.)

First, can we defend (1), the independence of morality from God? Perhaps there are ways to show that what is morally good must be good and cannot be evil, that what is wrong cannot be right. If so, then God cannot turn good into evil or wrong into right but this is no limitation of God's omnipotence, since it is logically impossible for moral good and right to be other than they are. This thought is supported by the idea, mentioned above, that even if God commanded us to murder babies, it still wouldn't be right to murder babies, because such an action can't be right.

But if this is true, why is it true? It seems wrong to say that it is logically impossible. For instance, 'murdering babies is right' isn't (obviously) a contradiction in terms. What is morally right and wrong doesn't seem, at least, to

be a matter of pure logic. We were able to argue that an omnipotent being can't do what is logically impossible, since what is logically impossible is nothing at all. But if 'murdering babies is right' isn't logically impossible, then why couldn't an omnipotent being make it true? Whatever makes moral wrong and moral right what they must be something about the way the world is. Surely an omnipotent being can change the way the world to be any way that is logically possible. Not being able to change the world does seem like a lack of power.

Put another way, if moral wrong can't become right, what explains why the world must be this way? If the explanation doesn't refer to logic, and it doesn't refer to God, then won't it refer to something that places a constraint on what God can do?

We can develop this thought by starting again from the concept of God. If the concept of God we are discussing is roughly right and God exists, then it would be very strange to think that morality (for human beings) is completely independent of God. Nothing that exists is independent of God. If God exists and is supremely good, then everything that is morally good must relate back to God as the ultimate reality. If it is impossible for what is good to be evil, for what is wrong to be right, this may be because what is good depends on God's nature, and it is impossible for God not to be God.

God's omnipotence, then, requires that we reject (1).

So can (2), the claim that morality depends on God, be defended more successfully? We have already seen the objection that the view also entails that it would be right to murder babies if God willed it, and this doesn't seem right! Certainly, we would no longer think that God is good if God ordered such a thing, which suggests that we understand morality to be independent of what God wills.

Second, a challenge to the coherence of the concept of God begins to arise with this thought: if what is good or right is whatever God wills, then 'God is good' doesn't say anything substantial about God. Whatever God wills is by definition good - even murdering babies. So what can we mean by 'good' any longer if even this could be good? 'God is good' means no more than 'God wills whatever God wills'. It states a tautology. This empties the idea that God is good of any meaning.

We can develop this thought in a different direction. Saying that what is good is whatever God wills threatens to make morality arbitrary. Why does God will what he wills? There is no moral reason guiding what God wills because God invents morality. For example, the suffering of children is not yet a reason for God to think that it is morally wrong to command their death, because there is no moral right or wrong until God wills them. The suffering of children could just as easily be a reason for God to think it morally right to command their death. It would not be against reason for God to will the death of children or their care. In other words, facts about the suffering of children don't function as reasons at all, supporting one act of will over another. But if God has no reasons to will what he does, this means that there is no rational structure to morality. God's will is arbitrary.

These objections take us back to (1): there must be some independent standard we are implicitly relying on to say that what God wills is, in fact, morally good. But (1) is incompatible with God's omnipotence. The dilemma leaves us struggling to say that God is omnipotent or to say that God is good - we cannot, it seems, say both meaningfully. This challenges whether our concept of God is coherent.

DISCUSSION

One reply to the dilemma is to argue that although God's will does not respond to anything independent of it, it is not arbitrary. To defend this claim, we can appeal to God's other attributes, such as love. God's will is structured by God's love, and it is this that creates morality. God wills what he does because he loves.

Yet we may still ask: why does God love what he does? Is this arbitrary? If God loved something else, then morality would be different.

But could God love something different? For instance, suppose God loves all reality. Then there is nothing God doesn't love. Or again, given God's nature, could God love differently? If we can't form a clear conception of God loving differently and still being God, then the objection fades away.

Good is the same property as what God wills

One development of this position draws a distinction between concepts and properties to explain how morality is the same thing as what God wills, but 'God is good' is not a tautology. The thought is that 'God' and 'morally good' are different concepts. It is not an analytic truth that goodness is what God wills. However, goodness is the same property as what God wills.

A different example will help. 'Water' and 'H₂O' are different concepts, and before the discovery of hydrogen and oxygen, people knew about water. They had the concept of water, but not the concept of H₂O. And they didn't know that water is H₂O. So 'water is H₂O' is not analytically true. However, water and H₂O are one and the same thing - the two concepts refer to just one thing in the world. Water is identical to H₂O.

The same account can be given of 'good' and 'what God wills' - they are different concepts, and people can have and understand the concept of goodness without the concept of God. So 'God is good' is not an analytic truth. However, what is good is the same thing as what God wills. It is not something separate which provides a standard for God's will. Morality is dependent on God. This is a metaphysical truth (about what exists) but not a conceptual truth about morality.

But how can we establish that goodness and what God's will are the same thing? Unless we have an independent standard of goodness, we cannot claim that what God wills meets this standard and so can be identified with what is good.

This is true, but it only applies to how we know what is good, not what goodness turns out to be. We can only judge that water is H₂O if we have some independent idea of what water is. But that doesn't mean water is not H₂O. Likewise, to judge that what is good is what God wills, we need, at least initially, independent

concepts of what is good and of what God wills. Which is fine, since we do form these concepts in distinct ways. But once we think that water is H₂O, we will say that whatever is H₂O is water. Likewise, once we come to believe that what is good is what God wills, we may use what we believe God's will to be to start judging what is good. Our understanding of God's will, we may argue, is our best source of knowledge about what is good.