

THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

T. J. Mawson

Is something good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good? This lies at the heart of our debate on "Good without God". Here Tim Mawson explains how he thinks the theist can solve it.

Some two and a half thousand years ago, a young man called Euthyphro was on his way to the law courts, convinced in his own mind that justice and the gods were on his side. On his way there, he fell into conversation with Socrates, who pressed on him the question that to this day bears the young man's name: the Euthyphro Dilemma. Essentially, the question Socrates posed was this: Is something good because God wills it or does God will it because it is good? This question poses a dilemma for those who believe in a God of the sort Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship (theists) as – at least initially - there seems to be no way of answering it that enables them to say everything that they characteristically wish to say about their God.

If theists say that God wills things because they are good, they appear to be saying that moral values are independent of God's will. But this seems to be to posit a standard of value prior to God's actions, one which may thus seem to threaten God's sovereignty, freedom and omnipotence. Don't these moral truths restrict God's choices? Isn't He powerful enough to change them? So saying that things are good independently of God's will seems to be not without difficulties for the theist. What about saying that things are good because God wills them?

If theists say that things are good because God wills them, they are saying that He creates moral values – perhaps by means of a command, as an absolute monarch might make laws. But this seems to make morality arbitrary

and our knowledge of it extremely difficult. If the moral values that hold sway in our universe do so as a result of God's entirely unconstrained will, then it seems that God could not have had any reason for exercising that will one way rather than another. It seems then that on this model we should say that had God's whim been different, torture – for example – might well have been morally good. If this did indeed follow from the model, it would be very counterintuitive indeed; surely torturing people would be bad whatever anyone, even God, had to say about it. In fact the model might seem to have even more counterintuitive consequences than this: it might seem to be that on it we should conclude that, for all we know, torturing people is morally good right now, but it's just that we live in a universe where it is also morally good to deceive people about important things and thus God, being perfectly good by that standard, is deceiving us right now about how good it would be were we to become torturers. Thus, saying that things are morally good just because God wills them seems to be not without difficulties for the theist either. What then is the theist best advised to say to the Euthyphro Dilemma?

I suggest that the theist is best advised to reject Socrates' 'Either . . . Or' way of framing the question, saying instead that some things God wills because they are good and other things are good because God wills them. For this solution to the Euthyphro Dilemma to give the theist the best of both worlds rather than the worst, he or she then needs a way of explaining how the things that God wills because they are good are things that do not set up a standard of behaviour independent of God, a standard that could correctly be thought to constrain God in His actions, and also a way of explaining how the things that get to be good solely as a result of God's will are things that it's not, after all, counterintuitive to suggest could have been bad. Theists are almost universally happy with saying that some things – the truths of logic for example – not even God in His omnipotence needs to be able to alter, so a way of meeting these demands suggests itself: show that the

things which God wills because they are good are only as constraining on Him as are the necessary truths of logic, i.e. show that they are not constraining at all; and show how the things that are good because God wills them could intuitively have been bad had the world been different in ways that God could well have made it different. This is what this paper aims to do. It does so via a tried and tested method of Analytic Philosophy, what one might call the 'It all depends on how you describe it' method.

Sometimes we pick something out using a concept that entails of logical necessity that the thing picked out is bad. *Agonizing pain* would be one such concept. Wherever there is agonizing pain, whether in people or animals, it cannot – of logical necessity – be anything other than bad. We wouldn't call it 'agonizing pain' if it wasn't bad. Of course if someone would benefit greatly from some agonizingly painful medical treatment to which they have consented, then giving them that treatment might be the best thing for us to do, but the fact that this treatment would involve the patient suffering agonizing pain would in itself be a bad feature of what it was that it would then be best for us to do. If we view God's omnipotence as not requiring of Him that he be able to bring about logically impossible states of affairs, then as of logical necessity *agonizing pain* can only ever refer to something bad, not even God can be required to be able to make *agonizing pain* refer to something and yet the thing to which it refers not be bad. Since of conceptual necessity torture involves the inducing of agonizing pain, so not even God can be required to be able to make a universe whereby something picked out by the concept of torture is good. We are hence not forced to say of God that he could make torture good; we are indeed forced to say the opposite, which is what our intuition told us to say anyway: not even God could make torture good in the same way that not even God could make bachelors married.

Some things are good or bad for people as a conceptual necessity arising from the fact that they are people. It is

plausibly of the essence of personhood that it involves the having of beliefs and the concept of belief necessitates that persons want true beliefs. Of conceptual necessity, one cannot go about acquiring beliefs save by thinking that one is acquiring them in a way which makes them more likely to be true than false because beliefs just are those mental occurrences one takes to be true representations of the world. If that is right, then it is not a logically contingent feature of people that people aim at true beliefs and thus we cannot but think that true beliefs are good for people. If this is right, then we cannot but think that it is of necessity always in itself bad to lie to people, i.e. try to get people to have false beliefs. Lying to someone might not always be the worst thing possible. If someone comes to your door asking after the whereabouts of a person whom you know they intend to murder and whom you also know is hiding in your attic, lying to this would-be murderer might well be the best of the options available to you. But lying to someone, even in this case, is in itself bad; ideally, you would have the power to tell the would-be murderer the truth, yet argue him or her round from murder. If you lie to someone, then, in that aspect of your relationship to him or her, you fail fully to respect his or her personhood; by deceiving someone you do something that in itself frustrates his or her flourishing as entailed merely by the fact that he or she is a person, and this is in itself of necessity bad. Again, not even God could make lying to a person good, but again that is no more of a restriction on His power than that He could not make bachelors married whilst they nevertheless remained bachelors.

So one can use concepts which apply to things that are bad of conceptual necessity. *Agonizing pain* would be one example, *torture* another. One can use concepts which apply to things which are bad of conceptual necessity for people. *Lying* would be one example. Badness or badness for people is part of the content of these concepts in the same way that singleness is part of the concept *bachelor*. Things which instantiate these concepts are of logical necessity bad or bad

for people and thus they are of logical necessity bad or bad for people in any universe in which these things may be picked out by these concepts, just as things which instantiate the concept *bachelor* are of logical necessity single and thus they are single in any universe in which they may still be picked out by this concept. Not even God could make a universe in which the things which may be picked out by these concepts are good or good for people for the same reason that not even God could make a universe where the people who may be picked out by the concept of *bachelor* are married. These then are the 'moral' realities to which God must 'conform Himself'. I put 'moral' in scare quotation marks as in fact they have no more moral content to them than the 'marital' truth that bachelors are unmarried has marital content to it. I put 'conform Himself' in scare quotation marks as in virtue of the fact that they have no moral content, these necessary truths are in no way restrictions on Him. God's sovereignty, freedom and omnipotence are not in any way curtailed by them. There is nothing that in 'conforming Himself' to them God is thereby prevented from doing: the logically impossible isn't anything; it's not even a possibility; that's why we call it the logically impossible. So much then for the things which have the value they do independently of God's will.

Some concepts pick out things that are bad for people via contingent features that people happen – universally but not essentially – to have. As it happens, all people in this world have the property of suffering agonizing pain if a large amount of electricity is passed through their bodies; this being so, it is a universal truth that it's bad to pass this amount of electricity through people. But the universal badness of passing large amounts of electricity through people is obviously the result of contingent features of the natural world, features that on theism God has freely chosen to create and that consequently it is not at all counterintuitive to suggest could have been different. Thus the theist is free to say that all substantive moral truths (as opposed to conceptual necessities) depend on God's will in creation, but this does not, after all, have the counterintuitive consequence that

we must say that God could make torture, for example, good. As we have just seen, torture is of logical necessity bad and thus not even God could make it good. Anything which one can successfully pick out under the concept *torture* must be a bad thing, just as anything which one can successfully pick out under the concept *bachelor* must be a single person. Demanding that we say that God could make torture good would be like demanding that we say He could make a married bachelor. However, God could certainly have made or could yet make passing an electric current of a certain amount – an amount which actually has always caused and will always cause excruciating agony in any creature – through a person's body good. Were God to have created people with a different biological construction or now change their biological properties by some natural-law-violating miracle, then passing a large electric current through their bodies would have been or could become good, morally acceptable, or even obligatory. But then of course it would no longer be torture. There is nothing counterintuitive about this. After all, a magician can make 'sawing a lady in half' good, morally acceptable, or even obligatory (supposing him to have freely entered into a contract to 'saw a lady in half' as a part of his show) *if* he can make it not have the consequences it would usually be expected to have in humans. (Of course he couldn't make literally sawing a lady in half not have these consequences, which is why I needed the scare quotation marks; to do that he really would have to be a magician.) It's no accident that we applaud the magician who 'saws the lady in half' *only when* we see that the lady is alive and well.

An analogy will help us in drawing these strands together.

Let us imagine that we are creating a board game. If in creating our game we are starting from scratch, with no pieces or board as yet, then the only principles 'constraining' us are conceptual necessities – for example that cheating cannot be an acceptable way to win the game – and these are, it is easy to see, not properly thought of as

constraints at all. They don't restrict in any sense our sovereignty, freedom or power over what sort of game to create, what it is that will count as cheating and what as winning fair and square. Once we have made the pieces and the board, there will still be decisions to be made about the rules. The same pieces and board might be used for several different games. However, the rules open for us to choose between will have been to some extent constrained by the natures of the pieces and the board we have by then created. For example, supposing us to have made only four pieces, we would not then be able to choose the rule, 'The game must have at least six players, of whom each should start with an unshared piece'. This is a logical consequence of the number of pieces we have contingently made, not a contingent one. It is logically necessary that if there are only four pieces, then six people cannot have one unshared piece each. It is contingent whether there are only four pieces.

Thus it was with God's creation of morality. Prior to the creation of humans and the universe, the pieces and the board if we assume for the sake of simplicity (what is false) that there are no non-human people or animals that count morally, the only principles which 'constrained' Him in what morality He could create were conceptual necessities, i.e. He was under no constraint at all. He couldn't create a world where agonizing pain or torture was good, but that was just because it is logically impossible that agonizing pain or torture be good. He had complete freedom over what, if anything, in the universe He was about to create would instantiate the concepts of *agonizing pain* and *torture* and hence over what, if anything, would be bad in virtue of doing so. Having created the pieces, people, this entailed that certain things would, of logical necessity, be bad – lying, for example. Having created people as humans, with the contingent physiology that humans happen to have, this entailed that passing a certain electric current through their bodies would always in itself be bad as it would always produce agonizing pain (natural

law-violating miracles aside), which is something which is in itself of conceptual necessity bad. This is analogous to the maker of a game who has created a certain number of pieces or a style of board that constrains the rules he or she might then choose in that it is a logically necessary consequence of a contingent fact. (It is logically necessary that if passing a certain electric current through persons' bodies produces agonizing pain, then it is in itself bad to pass that amount of electricity through persons' bodies.) These then are the things which have the value they do solely as a result of God's will in creation; had God's will been different, they would have been different. But there is nothing counterintuitive about this. Obviously if people's physiology had been different, then things which are as a matter of fact universally bad for people might have been good and things which are universally good might have been bad. Obviously on theism people having the physiology that they do is a result of God's entirely unconstrained will in His act of creation.

In conclusion then, we have seen that the theist may say that God creates all value in the sense that prior to God's creation, there were no substantive principles to constrain Him in the choices He made. However, this does not mean that He could have chosen to create a world in which torture was good, for such a world is a *logical* impossibility and not even God should be expected to be able to do the logically impossible. The goodness of refraining from torturing people is something that is logically necessary. God wills that we refrain from torturing people because of the necessary badness of torture. It is not that torture gets the badness that it does because of God's will. But what acts count as torture and what not is something entirely a result of God's free will in creation. So we may say that of anything which can be picked out using a term that does not itself of logical necessity entail anything about the goodness or badness of the thing so picked out, the answer to the question of why that thing has the goodness or badness that it has is that it does so because God has

willed it to do so. And thus the Euthyphro Dilemma is solved.¹

Tim Mawson is Lecturer in Philosophy and Fellow of St. Peter's College, Oxford.

Note

¹ Variants of this solution to the Euthyphro Dilemma may be found in R. G. Swinburne's 'Duty and the Will of God', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1974); *The Coherence of Theism* (OUP, 1993), revised edition, chapter 11; and *Responsibility and Atonement* (OUP, 1989), page 126 ff, and T. J. Mawson's, 'God's Creation of Morality', *Religious Studies* 38 (2002) and *Belief in God* (OUP, 2005), page 72ff.