

A way out of the Euthyphro dilemma

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Abstract: I defend the view that morality depends on God against the Euthyphro dilemma by arguing that the reasons that God has for determining the moral–natural dependencies might be personal reasons that have non-moral content. I deflect the ‘arbitrary whim’ worry, but I concede that the account cannot extend to the goodness of God and His will. However, human moral–natural dependencies can be explained by God’s will. So a slightly restricted version of divine commandment theory is defensible.

Moral dependence and the Euthyphro dilemma

Suppose we judge that a human being has a moral property M *because* he has a natural property N. M might be the property of being good, evil, virtuous or vicious, obligatory or forbidden; and N might be the property of having certain psychological states or standing in certain social relations to other human beings or having certain physical properties. And suppose that judgement is correct.

One thought or assumption would be that this is all there is to it, and N is the ultimate right-maker of M. Let us call that theory ‘anti-theory’. For an anti-theorist, M–N dependencies are brute and unexplainable, like the existence of the physical world for physicalists or like the existence of God for theists. But suppose we reject anti-theory and we embrace anti-anti-theory-theory. Then we think that something could explain the dependence of M on N; there could be something that explains why a person’s being N makes her M. One possibility is that there is a more basic, more general moral dependence relation under which this case is subsumed. For example, consequentialism or deontology might be true general theories, and if so, the person would be M in virtue of maximizing happiness, or in virtue of respecting rights, and for Kantian deontologists, the latter would depend further on being consistently willable. Another possibility is that in virtue of which the M–N dependence relation holds is not a very general moral fact but some other kind of fact. The grounding fact need not be a moral fact.

Even if there is some such deeper fact underpinning the ordinary dependencies that we assert in making moral judgements (such as the dependence of M on N), there is no reason to hold in addition that we need to *know* the more general moral fact or non-moral grounding fact in order to assert ordinary dependencies. Conceptual competence does not require that we know that on which the dependencies we assert ultimately depend.

Consider the view that some M–N dependency (henceforth ‘D’) holds because God wills it: D depends on God’s will. The idea is that the moral dependence facts obtains because God willed its existence. He might will D directly or He might will it by willing the facts of consequentialism or deontology, on which D depends. Either way, moral dependencies are due to, or depend on, God. This is one way of characterizing divine commandment theory.

Now, enter stage Plato’s Euthyphro dilemma: are things good because God wills them or does God will them because they are good (Plato 1997)? ‘The former!’, declares the Divine Commandment Theorist. But then, famously, a secondary sub-dilemma opens up: does God have *reasons* for willing what He does? Or not? If so, the reasons for which God wills things are really the ultimate right-makers, and God Himself swiftly drops out of the picture; and if not, His acts of will looks like arbitrary whims.

The sub-dilemma raises the general question of whether there are reasons for God’s commandments. Suppose that God *has* reasons, whether or not we know those reasons. (Moses Maimonides in *Guide for the Perplexed*, claims that God’s reasons for some of the commandments are withheld from us because if we knew the reasons it would weaken our compliance with them (Maimonides 1958).) If God has reasons for willing D, or for willing some more basic dependency on which D depends, then His having those reasons is the ultimate explanation of D. And if God’s reasons are just that consequentialism or deontology or whatever is true, and this non-divine moral fact is the deeper right-maker of M, then the Divine Commandment Theorist is spiked on a sub-horn and God has dropped out of the picture. God has become morally irrelevant. Moreover, the other horn seems unavailable: it cannot be that God simply has *no* reasons for willing the dependencies. That would make His acts of will ‘arbitrary whims’, in an uncontroversially bad sense.

Personal reasons

However, the virtue of having set up the Euthyphro issue in this way is that we can see that it is possible that God has *other* kinds of reasons. The sort of reasons I have in mind would not be like consequentialism or deontology where God’s reason for willing the dependencies is just His belief in some general moral theory. This is not the only kind of reason that God can have.

In particular, I want to suggest that God might have a certain kind of *personal* reasons for willing what He does – where a personal reason is one that is expressed by means of an indexical, such as ‘I’ or ‘my’. With human beings, our love for our friends or family and our relationships with them gives us personal reasons to do various things for them. We also have personal reasons to keep our own promises. Many of our reasons are personal in this sense. There seems to be no reason why God should not have personal reasons too. God’s personal reasons would be a matter of how it is with Him or with His relations to others. If so, it seems that no Euthyphro problem would arise, so long as the personal reasons are not moral personal reasons, in the sense of having moral content.

Of course, it is difficult to know whether this avenue is attractive until we have some idea what God’s non-moral personal reasons might be. The important thing, however, is the theoretical space for a divine commandment theory of this sort. Consider Kierkegaard’s tongue-in-cheek suggestion (in *Either/Or*) that God created the world because He was *bored* (Kierkegaard (1944), 282). Might God also have willed the moral dependencies for that reason? This would be a consistent theory. His reason would involve an indexical, ‘I do this because I am bored!’, thinks God. This is a personal reason, not an impersonal one, and it lacks moral content. Perhaps Kierkegaard’s suggestion is not the correct one. (Perhaps God does not get bored.) However, it is a reason of the right sort.

Consider a non-divine example – many people like growing roses. This gives them reasons to do various things, such as buying compost and pruning. Unlike the case of merely being bored, their reasons for doing these things are good reasons. Growing roses is a decent hobby. But their reasons lack moral content. Those people are interested in roses, not in moral goodness. And this concern with roses gives them reasons to do things. God’s reasons for setting up moral–natural dependence relations might be similar.

The appeal to personal reasons is not just the appeal to non-moral reasons. That would not escape the Euthyphro problem, for if God wills N-M dependencies for non-moral reasons – for example, aesthetic reasons – then those non-moral reasons are the ultimate explanation of the dependencies. If so, God has dropped out of the picture again. But God’s non-moral *personal* reasons do not give *us* reasons. Ariel’s promises give Ariel a reason to keep his promises, but they do not create similar reasons for other people to do what Ariel promised; and Bea’s friendships give her a reason to do things for her friends, but they do not give the same reasons for other people to do things for Bea’s friends. Ariel’s promises are his not ours, and Bea’s friends are hers not ours. Similarly, God’s personal reasons do not apply to us since they are His, not ours.

This, then, seems to be a possible way out of the Euthyphro dilemma: the idea is that God has non-moral personal reasons for willing the ultimate moral dependencies. If God’s reasons for willing what He does were that he holds some moral theory, such as consequentialism or deontology, then the divine

commandment theory is dead. For the ultimate right-maker of M is some fact about consequences or rights, and God has nothing to do with it. But if God has non-moral personal reasons, divine commandment theory is at least alive, and could perhaps flourish, given further development.

Whims, dependence, and necessity

Are we now impaled on the other sub-horn? If God has non-moral personal reasons for willing or commanding what He does, why are they not arbitrary whims that need not bind us, just as much as His having no reasons at all?

We need to ask what ‘arbitrary whim’ means here. One way to construe the objection would be that on the divine commandment theory, as I have reconstructed it, God’s willing various moral dependencies is arbitrary in the sense that He could have willed otherwise. He could have willed that murder, theft, rape, and torture are alright. So it seems that murder, theft, rape, and torture would have been alright if God had chosen differently, which He could have done. Since He could have chosen to make murder, theft, rape, and torture alright, they could have been alright. But – the objection is – this consequence is unacceptable.

This objection confuses dependence with necessity. For the divine commandment theorist, the moral facts and M–N dependencies *depend* on God’s will. But the dependence of M–N dependencies on God’s will does not entail that it is contingent that they hold. God’s will is of course free. Being free means that the self is the source of willing and action. But it is not at all clear that this idea involves the ‘could have done otherwise’ principle, that a self that wills one thing could have willed another. That is another matter. Perhaps in *many* human cases of acting, we could do otherwise (assuming that we are not in unusual circumstances). But we should not extrapolate from our usual case to the essence of free will and thus to God’s will. Given the separation of dependence from necessity, there is no threat to God’s freedom from the necessity of what He does. So it is not the case that murder, theft, rape, and torture could have been alright on a divine commandment theory.

I note that the dependence/necessity distinction is in the background of the debate over the divine commandment theory since both the divine commandment theory and the contrary position, ‘autonomism’ about morality, agree that it is necessary that something is morally good if and only if God approves of it (or would approve of it if He exists). But that does not settle the issue of which depends on which. The autonomist says that God wills things because they are good whereas the divine commandment theorist says that they are good because God wills them, despite their agreement on the necessary connection between the two. The debate over the divine commandment theory cannot get off the

ground without the dependence/necessity distinction. The same goes for most philosophical issues in my view.

God's goodness

If God has personal reasons, those personal reasons need to be *good* reasons. (Otherwise they are 'arbitrary' in an uncontroversially bad sense.) God's reasons need not be impersonal reasons, and they need not be that some ordinary moral theory is true – such as consequentialism or deontology. But they do have to *be* good. There seems to be no reason why God's reasons may not be good reasons despite being personal and lacking moral content. They may be good non-moral personal reasons. Nevertheless, there is a difficulty: where does the goodness of those reasons come from? The trouble is that it seems that God's will cannot explain the goodness of His reasons for willing what He does. An act of will surely cannot self-create its own goodness. For the goodness attaching to an act of will is prior to whatever the act achieves. So the goodness of God's acts of will cannot be a product of God's acts of will. God cannot, like Napoleon, crown himself with goodness.

Distinguishing different moral concepts does not help at all with this problem, as some have thought. For it is also true that God is obliged to will what He does, and that He is virtuous in willing what he does. The problem applies whichever of God's moral properties we consider. A more plausible response is to say that the goodness of God's personal reasons (that is, of God's having those reasons) need not be *moral* goodness. If they have to be morally good reasons, there is indeed a nasty circle – and there would be a problem about the source of the moral goodness of those reasons. But not all goodness is moral goodness. Suppose, for example, that the reasons have *rational* virtues. If God's reasons have goodness of some kind other than moral goodness, it would mean that one cannot hold a divine command theory of *that* goodness. That means that one cannot hold a divine command theory of *all* normative properties – moral, rational, and whatever other normative properties there are. But one can hold a restricted divine command theory of *moral* norms, so long as God wills them rationally. If He wills the moral norms, and that willing is rational, then they are not arbitrary whims. I assume that an arbitrary whim is irrational or at least non-rational. But if God has non-moral personal reasons, like the reasons of rose-growers, His willing may be rational. That seems to be good enough. It is true that whatever kind of goodness attaches to God's will and His reasons, we cannot hold a divine command theory of that goodness. But of other kinds of goodness, we can.

I am not satisfied with this. What of God's *moral* goodness? Surely it cannot be denied that God and His will are morally good. God, and His will, are essentially and necessarily good. Does *that* moral goodness depend on His willing that He is

morally good and essentially and necessarily so? Would not that act of will have to be antecedently morally good? If so, it seems that He cannot will the goodness of His act of will, since that act of will would have to be morally good. The problem is not that this generates a regress. God usually doesn't mind regresses, being uncommonly infinite. Indeed He relishes them and eats them up for breakfast! But the problem with the moral goodness of God's will is that, for the divine commandment theorist, His goodness arises from the fact that moral goodness figures in the content of God's acts of will. That is *how* His will generates goodness. But if moral goodness is created by figuring in the content of God's will then that cannot explain the moral goodness that attaches to those acts of will. This is a problem.

I think this must be accepted. God's own goodness cannot be explained by a divine commandment theory. That is bad news. The relatively good news is that there is no reason why other goodness cannot be so explained. We can hold a restricted divine commandment theory. But it is not very restricted, for it still provides an explanation of all the M–N dependencies that populate our human moral life.

There remains a puzzle about the moral goodness of God and the goodness of His will. Goodness is a dependent property, like all normative properties: if something is good it must be good in virtue of other properties. (This is a problem for Plato, for he makes goodness fundamental in the world.) God's goodness depends on the essence of God, whatever it is. The question is how His goodness relates to His acts of will. There are three things: God's essence, His acts of will, and His goodness. The previous argument shows that His goodness does not depend on His acts of will. So the divine commandment theory cannot be completely general. There are two remaining possibilities. The first is that His will depends on His goodness, which depends on His essence. The second is that both His will and His goodness depend on His essence, but neither His will nor His goodness depend on each other. On either view, God's goodness is not explained by His will, unlike the goodness of everything else. Either way, God's goodness is closely related to His will: both flow from the inscrutable essence of God (Maimonides 1958). But His will does not explain His goodness. For the divine commandment theorist, God's goodness has a special explanation – it is the exception – and the goodness of everything else depends on God's will.

Coda

My proposal, then, is that God has reasons for willing the goodness of things. Those reasons are not moral reasons. They are His personal reasons, which concern Him or things that stand in relation to Him.

I confess that I cannot actually state what God's personal reasons are. I cannot put that on the table; that's asking a bit much! (God is famously inscrutable.) But

so long as God's reasons are personal, and lack moral content – like rose-growers' concerns with their roses – divine commandment theory is not out of the running. Non-moral personal reasons can be good reasons for us humans, even though they are not themselves moral reasons (that is, reasons with moral contents). So why not for God too? If God's reasons have a moral *content*, then God drops out of the picture. But if His reasons have non-moral content, then God's will may be the source of the norms of morality that apply to human beings.

The conclusion is only that the divine commandment theory is coherent, not that it is plausible. To show that it is plausible, we would have to have some idea of what God's personal reasons might be, and that they are good reasons, and also that what we take to be basic M–N dependencies need some further explanation, and also that the God explanation is the best explanation of them. But my aim here has been merely to show a way in which it could be that human morality depends on God.¹

References

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