

The Euthyphro dilemma

If God is the most perfect possible being, then each of the perfections attributed to God must be possible, and the combination of the perfections must also be possible. Here is a puzzle about God's omnipotence and perfect goodness.

Can God make right be wrong, or good be bad? Is morality whatever God wills it to be or is morality something independent of God?

1. If morality is whatever God wills, then if God wills what is (now) morally wrong, then what is wrong will become right - if God commands us to murder babies, then murdering babies would be morally right. What is morally right is right because God wills it.
2. If morality is independent of what God wills, then God cannot make what is wrong be right - murdering babies is wrong whatever God commands. But then, to be good, God must conform his will to something independent of him. God wills what is morally right because it is right.

The answer must be one or the other, but both alternatives can seem unsatisfactory, which creates a dilemma, known as the 'Euthyphro dilemma'.

To (2), we can object that this places a *constraint* on God. For instance, if God is supremely good, but morality is independent of God, then God cannot will anything, only what is right. This would mean that God is not omnipotent. Or again, God cannot change what is morally right - so God is not omnipotent. Since God is omnipotent, morality is not a restriction on God's will, but dependent on it. Or again, if God exists and is good, then everything that is morally good must relate back to God as the ultimate reality. Given the nature of God, morality must depend on God.

This argument leads us back to (1). But as we will see below, this also faces strong objections.

PLATO, EUTHYPHRO

In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato considered the question 'what is piety?'. Is piety doing whatever the gods want or do the gods want what is pious? Plato argued that both answers seem unsatisfactory, creating a dilemma. (Our version substitutes 'morality' for 'piety'.)

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 what is pious is pious because it is loved by the gods, or whether the gods love what is pious because it is pious. Euthyphro answers that the gods love it

because it is pious. This makes piety independent of the gods' love - it would count as piety whether or not the gods love it.

Socrates objects that this can't be right. What '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'. Piety, Euthyphro has said, is what is dear to the gods. So piety 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 there aren't any further *reasons* for the gods loving what they do.

But suppose we agree that piety is independent of what the gods love. So what is it? Euthyphro suggests it is justice in relation to the gods. This requires that we learn how to please them in prayers and sacrifices. This doesn't bring them any benefit; it simply pleases them. But then, objects Socrates, piety once more becomes whatever pleases the gods - what is pious is pious because the gods love it. Euthyphro has found it impossible to say what piety is, independent of what the gods love.

IS 'GOD IS GOOD' A TAUTOLOGY?

The discussion so far supports the view that morality is whatever God wills. However, this faces two powerful objections.

The first is this: If good is whatever God wills, then 'God is good' doesn't say anything substantial about God. *Whatever* God wills is by definition good. 'God is good' means no more than 'God wills whatever God wills'. It states a tautology.

Here are two possible replies:

Reply: 'God is good' means 'God is good to us', i.e. God loves us and wants what is best for us. And what is best for us can be understood in a way that is not dependent on whatever God wills.

Objection: But then, there is some standard of what is good, viz. what is best for us, which is independent of what God wills.

Reply: 'God is good' should be understood *metaphysically*, not morally: 'God is good' just means that God has all perfections.

Objection: But then what is the connection between the metaphysical sense of 'good' and the moral sense of 'good'? Does God being perfect entail that God is *morally* good? If so, then 'God is (morally) good' is still a tautology. If not, then is morality independent of metaphysical perfection?

MORALITY IS ARBITRARY

The second objection to saying that what is good is whatever God wills is that it makes morality arbitrary. *Why* does God will what he wills? On this view, there is no moral reason guiding what God will because God *invents* morality. But if God has no reasons to will what he does, this means that there is no rational structure to morality. The view also entails that it would be right to murder babies if God

willed it. This doesn't seem right! For both these reasons, there must be some independent standard we are implicitly relying on to say that what God wills is, in fact, morally good.

We may reply that although God's will does not respond to anything independent of it, it is not arbitrary. For example, we can appeal to God's other attributes, such as love. But then aren't we judging God's will by the standard of love? If so, morality is still independent of God. But this is a misunderstanding: the claim is not that the basis of morality is love, but that the basis of morality is *God's* love.

Does this answer make morality arbitrary? Not obviously. 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.

GOOD IS THE SAME PROPERTY AS WHAT GOD WILLS

A third solution to the *Euthyphro* dilemma is to say that morality *is* the same thing as what God wills, but 'God is good' is *not* a tautology. How is this possible?

The answer depends on a distinction between *concepts* and *properties*. 'God' and 'morally good' are different concepts. It is not an analytic truth that God is good. 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 one concept without the other. 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.

We can object that unless we have an *independent* standard of goodness, we cannot claim that God's will and what is good are the same thing. 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. God's will, we may argue, is our best source of knowledge about what is good.