

The *Euthyphro* Dilemma

THE DILEMMA

There is a puzzle about the coherence of God's omnipotence and perfect goodness. It is this: Can God make right be wrong? For example, could God make murdering babies morally right? Does God conform his will to what is morally good, which is independent of what God wills; or is what is morally good whatever God wills it to be? Put another way: is morality whatever God wills or commands or is it something independent of God's will?

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. But 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. Isn't this a *constraint* on God?

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 'morally good' (or 'morally right') for 'pious'.

If we say that morality exists independently of God's will, then we must explain why morality is not a constraint on God. For instance, if God is perfectly good, but morality is independent of God, then God cannot will anything (only what is good). This would mean that 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 valuable must relate back to God as the ultimate reality. What is moral must depend on God.

On the other hand, saying that what is moral goodness is whatever God wills faces two powerful objections.

1. IS 'GOD IS GOOD' A TAUTOLOGY?

If good is whatever God wills, then 'God is good' doesn't say anything substantial about God. *Whatever* God wills is by definition good. This empties the claim 'God is good' of meaning. Here are three responses (a fourth appears below):

1. '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. But if this is so, what is best for us does not depend on what God wills, which leads to (2).
2. Not *all* of morality depends on God's will, only our moral duties. Now if morality includes not only duties, but also what is morally *good* and moral *virtues*, then this

answer allows that moral goodness and virtue do not depend on God, and this leads to problems. First, there is something that is ultimately real that does not depend on God. Second, as God is perfectly good, what God wills is dependent on something independent of God, which seems to be a constraint on what God can will. Third, if what God commands is based on what is morally good, then do we need to refer to God's commands to say what our moral duties are? Why not say that our moral duties are given directly by what is morally good, i.e. the *reasons* for God's commands, not God's commands themselves?

3. 'God is good' should be understood *metaphysically*, not morally: 'God is good' just means that God has all perfections. 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' still has not meaning. But if not, then is morality independent of metaphysical perfection?

2. MORALITY IS ARBITRARY

Another objection to saying that what is good is whatever God wills is that it makes morality arbitrary. There is no answer to *why* God wills what he wills. God doesn't will what he wills because there is some moral reason or value he is responding to. God *invents* morality. But if God has no reasons to will what he does, this means that there is no rational structure to morality. Furthermore, it entails that it would be right to murder babies if God willed it. This doesn't seem right!

There must be some standard we are implicitly relying on to say that what God wills is, in fact, morally good. So we might argue that it is only right to do what God wills if what God wills is good. But how can we tell whether this is true unless we have some independent standard of goodness? But then morality is independent of God.

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 to be 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 it is *God's* love.

There is, however, still no further basis to morality than God's (loving) will. But is this a problem? Suppose morality didn't depend on God's will, but some set of 'ultimate' moral values or judgments, such as 'unnecessary suffering is bad' or 'rationality should always be treated as an end in itself'. Are these any less arbitrary than God's will, especially if we claim that God is ultimate reality? It seems not..

GOOD IS THE SAME PROPERTY AS WHAT GOD WILLS

A fourth solution to the *Euthyphro* dilemma is to say that 'God is good' is not an analytic truth, because 'God' and 'morally good' are different concepts. However, goodness is the same property as what God wills. This is what 'God is good' states; it is similar to 'water is H₂O'. It is informative, because it provides an account of what 'good' refers to, viz. God's will.

'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 didn't know that

water is H_2O – so ‘water is H_2O ’ is not analytically true. However, water and H_2O are one and the same thing – the two concepts refer to just one thing in the world. Once we know that water is H_2O , we also know that anything that isn’t H_2O *can’t be* water. Water is *identical* to H_2O ; it is one and the same thing, so water is necessarily H_2O .

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. However, what is good is the same thing as what God wills, in fact it *can’t be* anything other than what God wills. So it is dependent on what God wills.

But still, how can we judge that God’s will and what is good are the same thing unless we have an *independent* standard of goodness? We may argue that this is a question of how we *know* what is good, not what goodness turns out to *be*. We can only judge that water is H_2O if we have some independent idea of what water is. But that doesn’t mean water is not H_2O . Likewise, to judge that what is good is what God wills, we need, *at least initially*, an independent conception of what is good and of what God wills. Which is fine, since we do form these concepts in distinct ways. Furthermore, once we think water is H_2O , we will say that whatever is H_2O is water. So 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, in fact, good.