

God and morality  
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**From objectivity to God**

Some philosophers believe that morality is objective, and that this cannot be explained unless God exists. For example, in *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, H P Owen argues that the only way to explain how values can exist independently of us is if morality is about our relationship to God.

First, moral demands seem impersonal, not deriving from any particular person or other, yet the ideas of obligation, duty, etc. suggest a personal constraint, while the idea of a moral command or law implies a commander or law giver. Who do we owe moral duties to? Why would we feel guilty or have a sense of responsibility about what we do unless we are responding to someone? Any attempt to explain these apparently 'personal' aspects of morality naturalistically, e.g. in terms of society, fails to account for the authority of morality. However, an explanation of morality in terms of God secures both authority and the personal nature of morality.

Second, persons exert moral claims because they are persons. However, they couldn't exert absolute claims, as it seems they do. People are only finitely good, hence not (as Kant thought) of unconditional worth. If being good was the only thing that entitled them to be treated well, we could treat many people badly. Yet people have certain 'rights' independently of how good they are. The respect we owe people as persons is, we rightly believe, distinct from that deserved by their goodness. It must therefore relate to something of absolute worth; God's valuing of persons would explain this.

Third, reverence of the moral law can't be reverence of something impersonal. First, it doesn't make sense to revere moral claims themselves. Yet, second, the moral law transcends human persons, so it isn't reverence for them either. But we value the personal more highly than the impersonal. So for our reverence of the moral law to make sense it must have a personal source greater than human persons.

Of course, these arguments can be responded to by invoking a Freudian notion of conscience (which would explain the personal nature of moral demands) and by arguments that undermine the claim that morality is objective. But I put those to one side for now, and turn instead to question whether it can be right to argue that morality is dependent on God.

**The Euthyphro dilemma**

A form of the problem was outlined by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. In his version, the question was 'what is piety?'. Our variation is 'what is good/right?'. If 'X is right' means 'X is commanded by God', then anything that God commanded would be right, and God's commands would be morally arbitrary. There is nothing, no pre-existing values, that God is responding when God commands some action. God *invents* morality. This doesn't seem right: it would not be right to slaughter innocent children even if God did command it. God's commands don't (generally) *make* an action right or wrong. On the other hand, if God commands certain actions because they are independently right, then

morality is independent of God, and we must wonder what invoking God actually explains about morality.

It would seem, then, that it is only right to obey God if God (and God's commands) is good. But how are we to say God is good? The problem repeats itself. If God is the standard of goodness, then to say 'God is good' is just to assert a tautology, which tells us nothing substantial about God, goodness, or the sort of commands we might expect (God's commands would be good by definition, no matter what those commands were). On the other hand, if 'God is good' is not a tautology, several problems arise. First, to understand it, we must have some independent understanding of goodness. Second, the only way we could come to know God is good is through God's manifestations; but then, again, we must be able to realise that these are good. So (the standard of) goodness is independent of God. But then morality is surely founded on goodness, not God. Once again, moral values exist independently of God, and the puzzle of their personal nature returns.

Owen tries to solve this conundrum by appealing to the idea that God is love. But we may then ask 'is what is loving morally good?' If so, then isn't morality still independent of God, as it is based on the value of love? This is a slippery argument, for one can respond that it is not the value of love, but of God's love, that morality is responsive to. God's will, then, is responsive to God's love (that seems right!), but there is no further ground to morality than God's love. This leaves the problem that God is good is a tautology, and the question of whether we have any independent standard by which to judge God's love as truly loving.

### **The 'supernaturalistic' fallacy**

The Euthyphro argument suggests that no fact, even the fact of being commanded or loved by God, is equivalent to the moral idea of being 'good' or what we 'ought to do'. The philosopher G E Moore presented a general argument of this kind. His main argument for believing that it is a fallacy – a mistake – to identify goodness with any other property (though Moore focused on natural properties) has been called the 'open question' argument. If goodness just is what God commands, say, then it wouldn't make sense to ask 'Is it good to do what God commands?' because this would be like asking 'Is doing what God commands doing what God commands?'. This second question isn't a real question (the answer has to be 'yes'), but 'Is it good to obey God's commands?' is a real question – the answer can logically be 'yes' or 'no'. And so goodness cannot be the same as obeying God's commands. Goodness cannot be any other property; it is just goodness.

Recently, philosophers have argued that Moore's argument doesn't work. Here is a similar argument. 'The property of being water cannot be any property in the world, such as the property of being H<sub>2</sub>O. If it was then the question 'Is water H<sub>2</sub>O?' would not make sense – it would be like asking 'Is H<sub>2</sub>O H<sub>2</sub>O?'. But it does make sense. So water is a simple, unanalysable property.' This is not right, as water *just is* H<sub>2</sub>O.

The reason Moore's argument doesn't work is because it confuses *concepts* and *properties*. As we have just seen, two different concepts – water and H<sub>2</sub>O – can pick out the same property in the world. (You learned about water long before you knew it was H<sub>2</sub>O – during this time, you had the concept of water, but not the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O. So they are different concepts, but they both refer to the same thing.) Likewise, the concept 'goodness' is a different concept from 'what God commands', but perhaps they are

exactly the same property in the world. They are just *different ways of thinking of the same thing*. What's interesting about this response, one that Owen endorsed, though he didn't formulate it in these terms, is that it accepts that *moral ideas and language* are autonomous – they aren't dependent on ideas about God – but that morality, and the status of morality as objective, is dependent on God.

### Kant's argument

Kant presented quite a different argument from morality to God. He rejected the idea that morality is founded on God or God's commands, instead claiming that morality is founded upon reason. (In Owen's terms, Kant is good, therefore, at explaining the impersonal authority of morality, but not its personal nature.) However, Kant argued that we need the idea of God to make sense of our moral duty.

Our duty is to seek the highest good, i.e. one in which moral laws are obeyed and people receive what they morally deserve. Our happiness is not the be all and end all of morality, but it is important. In the best possible situation, acting morally would make us happy; acting immorally would not. Obviously, that situation doesn't exist; but could it possibly? The only way to make sense of the possibility of the highest good is to suppose there exists a supreme being capable of bringing nature (natural events, human happiness) into line with morality. If that alignment doesn't happen in this life, then we may suppose it happens in the next.

Kant does not intend this to be a proof of the existence of God. We should act morally whether or not the highest good is possible; but it becomes questionable how much sense it makes to strive after a goal that we do not think possible. So we need the idea of God to make sense of our practical lives. Since morality is founded on rationality, and God is necessary to make full sense (subjectively, practically) of morality, it is at least rational to believe in God.

Kant's first premise, however, is questionable: is it our duty to seek the highest good? If this is impossible, because God does not exist, then it would indeed seem irrational to pursue it. But this raises no difficulty for duty if we have no duty to pursue it. Perhaps our duty is to pursue as great a good as we can achieve, i.e. to be as morally good as we can be, and seek to do what we can to align human happiness with goodness. A popular principle in ethical theory is 'ought implies can': you can have no duty to do what you cannot do. By supposing that our duty is to seek the highest good, Kant puts himself in the position of needing to show that we can make sense of such a goal. But if we do not have that duty, we have no need to suppose that God must exist in order to make our goal possible.

However, if we can provide an argument for thinking it is our duty to seek the highest good (perhaps that all our efforts in this direction do logically aim at this end), then Kant's argument carries more weight. But we may raise a second objection: whether rationality really requires us to suppose the goal at which we aim to be achievable. It may be perfectly rational to *seek* an impossible goal, e.g. science seeks empirical truth – must we therefore suppose that it is possible for us to know everything? This is, at least, contentious.