

C.S. Lewis and the Euthyphro Dilemma

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to rebut various objections to meta-ethical theories that essentially involve reference to God. I shall not be attempting to argue that such a theory is true, but only to rebut the main objections to such theories, the most important of these objections being the Euthyphro Dilemma. I contend that there is a theistic ethical theory that is not undermined by this objection, or by any of the related objections that are explained below.

We begin by outlining and offering a rationale for the theory that the Euthyphro dilemma takes as its target: Divine Command Theory (DCT). We then state the Euthyphro dilemma both in its traditional form and in the (more epistemological) form recently advanced by Kai Nielsen (among others). According to the traditional version of the dilemma, either morality is independent of God's will or morality is arbitrary and the proposition *God is good* is devoid of all content. Since the advocate of DCT must reject the first option, she is pushed to accept the second ... but to do so, his opponent claims, is unreasonable.

We consider ways in which DCT could be defended against this charge, but finally reject the traditional formulation of this theory in favour of a modified version that I call Divine Nature Theory (DNT). According to DNT, morality is rooted in God's necessary and immutable nature. Various objections to this position are dealt with in the final sections.

The Target: Divine Command Theory

Before we move to discuss and respond to the Euthyphro dilemma, it will be worth our while to consider briefly the theory that that dilemma is intended to refute. The position has been defended in various forms, but there is a common component to each. That common element is displayed in (DCT).

(DCT) For any x , x has moral status M , if and only if, and because, x stands in relation R to God.

Depending upon how M , R , and the range of x are delineated, different versions of DCT can be developed.^[1] Various candidates for M suggest themselves. We might offer our theory to account for deontological moral categories such as "morally obligatory", "morally wrong", and "morally permitted". Alternatively, we might focus upon the axiological categories of "morally good", "morally bad" and "morally indifferent". Since R has standardly been filled out with reference to divine commands, one obvious way to build upon (DCT) would be with the following three theses.

(DCTa) An action is morally obligatory for a particular agent at a particular time, if and only if, and because, God commands that agent to perform that action at that time.

(DCTb) An action is morally wrong for a particular agent at a particular time, if and only if, and because, God commands that agent to refrain from that action at that time.

(DCTc) An action is morally permitted for a particular agent at a particular time, if and only if, and because, God neither commands that agent to perform that action at that time, nor commands that agent to refrain from that action at that time.^[2]

Another popular route is to formulate the theory in terms of God's will rather than His commands, the result being extremely similar. Our attention will focus upon theories which hold that *all* moral categories should be explicated along the lines of (DCT). It should be obvious why theists have been attracted to such theories. They seem to capture the import of the "Thou Shalt"s of the Bible, and are in keeping with the general stress on God's sovereignty: the moral realm made is dependent upon God in much the same way as the physical realm.

This last point suggests a response to an initial worry voiced by atheist Michael Martin, among others. He claims that advocates of this theory ought to endorse the Karamazov Thesis.

(KT) If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.^[3]

I am not entirely sure why Martin finds (KT) so objectionable. I can understand why, as an atheist, he thinks (KT) false, but I am not sure why he should think less of theists who endorse (KT). In any case, I claim that while an advocate of a DCT may endorse (KT), there is no necessary relation between the two. Remembering that both the physical and moral realms are thought to be dependent upon God, we might note that although the theist endorses such claims as (GC) we would surely be mistaken to think the theist is committed to (NG).

(GC) God created everything other than Himself.

(NG) If God does not exist, then neither does anything else.

We must distinguish (NG) from (NG*) and (KT) from (KT*).

(NG*) If God did not exist, then neither would anything else.

(KT*) If God did not exist, then everything would be permitted.

It seems plausible to suggest that the theist and the advocate of DCT are committed to these last two propositions, but I submit that neither would cause offence to Martin in the same manner as (NG) or (KT).

The Euthyphro Dilemma

The Euthyphro dilemma in its classical form stems from one of Plato's dialogues in which he has Socrates in debate with Euthyphro, from whom the dialogue and the dilemma receive their names.

SOCRATES: Then what do we say about piety? Isn't it [what is] loved by all the gods, according to your definition?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Just because it is pious, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, because it is pious.

SOCRATES: So it is loved because it is pious, not pious because it is loved?

EUTHYPHRO: It seems so.

SOCRATES: But it is because a thing is loved by the gods that it is an object of love or god-beloved.

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

SOCRATES: Then what is god-beloved is not the same as what is pious, Euthyphro, nor is what is pious the same as what is god-beloved, as you assert; they are two different things.^[4]

According to the dialogue, Euthyphro held to the DCT of his day, and Socrates was attempting to show that his theory was false. Translating into to the modern equivalent and with an eye upon the DCT as formulated above, the central element of the Socratic strategy is this simple question:

(ED) Are actions morally obligatory because God commands them, or does God command them because they are morally obligatory?^[5]

This asks the advocate of DCT to choose between the following two propositions.

(ED1) Actions are morally obligatory because God commands them.

(ED2) God commands actions because they are morally obligatory.

Both statements are clearly compatible with the assertion that all and only those actions that God commands are morally obligatory. The question asks which way the explanation runs. It should be clear that our formulation of DCT actually entails (ED1) which, on the intended reading of "because", entails the denial of (ED2). It is therefore obvious how the defender of DCT ought to answer (ED). Curiously, however, Plato has Euthyphro give the opposite response, and it is not entirely clear why. It may be that Plato thought that (ED1) led to obvious absurdities, and would not deign to put such absurdities into the mouth of one of his characters. Just what those absurdities might have been we shall explore shortly. We might wonder, however, why the theist should be so bothered about which of (ED1) and (ED2) he accepts. If one can consistently hold (ED2) while asserting that all and only those things that God commands are morally obligatory then why should we be in the least tempted by (ED1)?

In effect, (ED2) claims to reveal the reasons for which God issues His commands. If (ED2) is correct, then it is because we are morally obliged to keep our promises that God commands us to keep them (assuming, of course, that we are so obliged). If this were the case, then promise keeping would be morally required even if God had not commanded it. In short, if (ED2) is true, then morality exists independently of God. Furthermore, if (ED2) is true, then it would appear that the moral code is in some sense "above" God, and that He is bound by it in just the same way as us. For these reasons, (ED2) will be unattractive to the theist, who will be forced to consider the other option.

Turning to (ED1), and the motives which may have prompted Plato to have Euthyphro endorse (ED2), we first note that if (ED2) states that God has moral reasons for issuing His commands, (ED1) would surely entail that God has no moral reasons for issuing His commands; that they are issued without moral reasons. This appears to make morality somewhat arbitrary. Secondly, if we endorse (ED1), questions arise as to what it means to say that God is good. DCT seems to entail (MG) and (GG).

(MG) Mary is good if, and only if, and because, Mary does as God commands.

(GG) God is good if, and only if, and because, God does as God commands.

Now the first of these may be okay, but the second is somewhat surprising. Not only is it unclear that God issues any self-directed commands, it also seems that no-one could be good simply in virtue of following whatever commands they happen to issue to themselves. The problem seems even more acute if we adopt a theory centred on God's will rather than on His commands, for then God will turn out to be good simply because He does what He wills! Now, if this is all that God's goodness amounts to, it surely doesn't amount to very much, and it would be hard to see how God's goodness makes Him in any way worthy of praise or worship. C.S. Lewis, who posed the Euthyphro dilemma in several of his writings, summarises the problem well.

[H]ow is the relation between God and the moral law to be represented? To say that the moral law is God's law is no final solution. Are these things right because God commands them or does God command them because they are right? If the first, if good is to be *defined* as what God commands, then the goodness of God Himself is emptied of meaning and the commands of an omnipotent fiend would have the same claim on us as those of the 'righteous Lord'. If the second, then we seem to be admitting a cosmic diarchy, or even making God Himself the mere executor of a law somehow external and antecedent to His own being. Both views are intolerable.[6]

Before we begin our response, I should like to state a second Euthyphro-like argument against DCT. This argument has received recent expression in Kai Nielsen's book *Ethics Without God*. The same basic argument occurs throughout the book, but one of the clearer statements runs as follows:

For 'God commanded it' to be a morally relevant reason for doing something, let alone a definitive moral reason for doing it, it must, at least, be the case that God is good. A believer, of course, believes this to be the case, but what grounds does he have for this belief? If he says that he knows this to be true because the record of the Bible, the state of the world or the behaviour of Jesus displays God's goodness, the believer clearly displays by his very response that he has some logically prior criterion for moral belief that is not based on the fact that there is a deity.

Yet it is more natural for a believer to reject the very question "How do you know God is good?" on the grounds that it is senseless. It is like asking "How do you know that scarlet things are red?" or "How do you know that puppies are young?" If he is something of a philosopher, he might tell you that "'God is good,' like 'puppies are young,' is analytic, it is a truth of language. We could not - logically could not - call any being, ground of being, power or force 'God' if we were not also prepared to attribute or ascribe goodness to it." ... [But this requires that] we can properly call some being ... 'God' only if we already know how to judge whether or not such a being ... is good. In this fundamental way even the devout religious believer cannot possibly base his morality on his religion - that is, on his belief in God. He, too, has an even more fundamental criterion for judging something to be good or morally obligatory. Since this is so, God cannot be the only criterion for moral belief, let alone the only fundamental or adequate moral criterion. We must look elsewhere for the foundations of morality." [7]

According to DCT, what God commands is morally relevant. Nielsen's argument assumes that this could not be the case unless God is good. Furthermore, we cannot know that God is good unless we know that He lives up to some moral standard.[8] According to the argument, this moral standard must be something we are acquainted with independently of God's commands. If it were not, if the standard were derived from God's commands, we would in effect be assuming the moral relevance of God's commands, which is exactly what we are trying to prove. Therefore, the argument continues, to be justified in accepting DCT we must be in possession of a moral standard which is not derived from God's commands. However, the forms of DCT we are considering assert that all moral standards derive from the ultimate standard of God's commands. If Nielsen's constraint on rational belief in God's goodness could be met, it would immediately follow that all such DCTs are false. On the other hand, if it could not be met, then it would seem that we could have no adequate grounds for thinking God's commands morally relevant. Either way, these forms of DCT are in trouble.[9]

Initial Response to Nielsen:

As I mentioned in the introduction, Nielsen's argument has a distinctive epistemological twist. The crucial assumption in Nielsen's argument is that if any component of our knowledge of morality is derived from God, then this will vitiate any attempt to use our knowledge of morality to establish God's goodness. This, however, is an assumption that need not be granted. Consider a parallel case suggested by J.P. Moreland.

[T]here is a certain epistemological or conceptual order to moral knowledge that's different from the metaphysical order regarding the existence of goodness itself. I might have to look at a road map of Chicago before I can know where Chicago is, so the road map might be first in the order of epistemology, but Chicago has to exist prior to the fact of the road map. Similarly, God's goodness would exist prior to the existence of finite, derived goodnesses, though conceptually or epistemologically, I might have to understand what "goodness" means before I would be able to make a judgement that God is good."[\[10\]](#)

There is, of course, a slight slip in the way Moreland has put things here. He implies that I could find out where Chicago is by looking at a road map of Chicago. This is obviously false. It is as if someone believed they could be certain of where they were because they knew that the indubitable statement, "I am here" was true of them. Nevertheless, Moreland's intentions are clear enough, and his point is surely right. If I do not know where the post-office is, then I might look in the street atlas. That atlas will be epistemically prior to the post-office. This is simply to say that I would be acquainted with the atlas first, and from it, I would gain knowledge of the town, and of the position of the post-office. However, the town is metaphysically prior to the atlas: the atlas was put together with reference to the town. But that the map was created in this way does not invalidate the knowledge I glean from it. Indeed, if the atlas were not so constructed one might conclude that the atlas was of no use at all. In some important sense unless a belief is derived from the thing which the belief is about then that belief will not, and could not, amount to knowledge. But it seems to be precisely this to which Nielsen is objecting.

At this stage, I ought to point out that though Nielsen's argument has been revealed to be unsound, his basic point has not yet been undermined. Why not? Because I have yet to delineate any plausible theory according to which we have a way of assessing God's goodness which is epistemically prior but metaphysically posterior to the goodness of God. My refutation of Nielsen's argument relies upon this possibility, but unless this possibility is plausibly thought to be realised, Nielsen's conclusion will stand firm. However, I think that there are plausible DCTs that could make use of this loophole in Nielsen's argument. I will outline such a theory later in the chapter.

Initial Response to the Traditional Dilemma

The first line of response to the Euthyphro dilemma is to argue that in so far as accepting (ED1) has the consequences the objector claims it to have, those consequences are in no way objectionable. The proponent of the Euthyphro dilemma, then, contends that DCT makes morality arbitrary and empties the goodness of God of all content. Calling the first objection the Arbitrariness Objection and the second the Emptiness Objection, we devote a section to initial responses to each. My reservations about these responses will follow these two sections.

The Arbitrariness Objection

There are several possible responses to this objection but the most obvious is simply to claim that (ED1) in no way entails that God's commands are arbitrary. As discussed above, it does entail that God's commands are not issued for moral reasons, but that hardly entails that they are issued *without* reasons, which is surely the worrying consequence that the objector had in mind.[\[11\]](#)

At this point the objector might reply that God's reasons are here acting as an independent moral standard, and that if an action is morally required because God commands it, and God issues that command for reason R, then that action is really morally required for reason R. That is, the objector might reason as follows.

(Arb1) God's commands are issued for particular reasons.

(Arb2) If some action is morally required it, this is because God commands it.

(Arb3) If God commands that action, He does so for some reason, R.

(Arb4) If X because Y, and Y because Z, then X because Z.

(Arb5) Therefore, if that action is morally required, this is for reason R.

The key premise of this argument appears to be (Arb4), which asserts the transitivity of the relevant "because" relations. But are these relations transitive or not? Many similar relations do not appear to be transitive. Although a person might have had a heart attack because he was exercising hard, and he might have been exercising hard because he wanted to get fit, the conjunction of these propositions does not obviously entail that he had a heart attack because he wanted to get fit.

Despite this, I worry that (Arb4) may be defensible (in this context, at least), and do not wish to repose any weight upon its denial. Rather I offer a response that does not hinge upon rejecting this premise, but on denying the interpretation of (Arb5) according to which it provides a good account of morality.

All that (Arb1) requires is that for any particular command, there is some reason why that command was issued. It does not require that there is some *one* reason behind all of God's commands. (Arb1) would allow that command₁ is issued for reason R₁, command₂ for reason R₂, command₃ for reason R₃ and so on indefinitely.

This being the case, accounting for moral properties by reference to God's commands may provide a much more unitary account of those properties than would an account which enumerated each of R₁, R₂, R₃, and so on. This in itself would give us reason to prefer the account provided by DCT to that provided by the conjunction of many (Arb5)-like propositions.[\[12\]](#).

The Emptiness Objection

According to the emptiness objection, DCT entails that "God is good" is devoid of all significant content. This is because according to DCT, God is good if, and only if, and because, God does what He commands. We noted above that the problem seems all the more acute if we formulate our DCT in terms of God's will, rather than his commands, for then God will be good if, and only if, and because, God does what He wills! But remarks such as "God does what He commands" and "God does what He wills" are not totally devoid of meaning. They can be understood as expressing a kind of consistency on God's part, stating that He acts by the same principles as He lays down for everyone else. Now, since it is by no means analytic that a person lives by the same rules as they want others to live by, it is not analytic that God is good, and hence, even on DCT this statement is not an "empty" one.[\[13\]](#)

Lewis and "Terrible" 18th Century Theologians

While there is some mileage in the responses given above, in this section, I suggest that these responses do not wholly succeed in rebutting the Euthyphro dilemma. Again, we take the arbitrariness issue first.

Perhaps by labelling God's commands arbitrary, the objector means simply to call their rationality into question. If so, we must then ask after the ways in which a command could fail to be rational. The only obvious answer to this question is in terms of means/end rationality. It is in general irrational to issue commands in an attempt to serve ends that cannot be served by the issuing of those commands. In some cases, the irrationality will emerge out of the end itself ... in such a case the end would be one that couldn't be served by anything (such as the desire to see a square circle). However, in most cases the irrationality

would arise due to an incompatibility or lack of relation between the end and the means. Now whatever ends God has, He surely doesn't have any intrinsically irrational ends such as desiring to see a square circle, and being all-knowing He will not issue commands that do not help to serve the ends He does have.[14]

So far as I can see, the only remaining available complaint would be that God's ends might have been very different from what they in fact are and that, had they been, God would have issued different commands and different things would have been right and wrong, good and bad. However, the objector will press, surely rape, for example, or cruelty for its own sake, could not possibly be right and any theory that implies that it could is false. Since DCT appears to be such a theory, DCT must be false. As with the Karamazov Thesis (KT) which we distinguished from (KT*), we must distinguish the following two propositions.

(R) According to DCT, rape might be morally required.

(R*) According to DCT, rape might have been morally required.

The proponents of DCT need not accept (R), but in it certainly seems that they must accept (R*). Our question, then, is whether accepting both DCT and (R*) is objectionable. Since rape was just a handy example, this, of course, amounts to asking about the modal status of moral claims. While I have no firm intuitions about these matters, I think that the moral status of actions cannot be contingent to quite the radical degree that DCT seems to imply.

There may, we shall assume, be possible worlds in which rape is not morally wrong, and even worlds in which it is morally required. I submit that if there are such worlds, they must be substantially different to our world in both non-moral and non-theological matters. This in turn will imply that God could not have created a world exactly like the actual world but for radically different reasons from those for which He created the actual world. If He could, then the moral obligations in such a world would be radically different from those in ours despite the perfect similarity in non-moral and non-theological matters. While my intuitions about the modal status of morality are slightly confused, I feel sure that any DCT with this implication is unacceptable. As a useful shorthand, we will express this point by saying that morality exhibits *strong modal status*. [15] C.S. Lewis seems to agree:

There were in the eighteenth century terrible theologians who held that "God did not command certain things because they are right, but certain things are right because God commanded them". To make the position perfectly clear, one of them even said that though God has, as it happens, commanded us to love Him and one another, He might equally well have commanded us to hate Him and one another, and hatred would then have been right.[16] It was apparently a mere toss-up which He decided on. Such a view in effect makes God a mere arbitrary tyrant. It would be better and less irreligious to believe in no God and to have no ethics than to have such an ethics and such a theology as this.[17]

The arbitrariness objection, then, has become the objection that DCT entails certain false modal claims about morality. Is there any way to save the theory from such an implication without losing the core of DCT? I will return to this question shortly. First, we move to reconsider the emptiness objection.

Although the remarks in the previous section go some way towards answering the emptiness objection, I find them less than fully satisfying. Were the question to arise in daily life, I doubt we would think a person living up to the standard they lay down for others (that is a person's lack of hypocrisy) to be sufficient for their moral goodness. We must admit, of course, that God is no ordinary person, and that His goodness might be something quite different to ours ... but if divine and human goodness are too different then we shall fall prey to Nielsen's argument, for then God will not be good in any morally relevant sense. Strongly suspecting that such a minimal account of God's goodness could not be sufficient to ground to moral relevance of God's commands, I must rank the above response to the emptiness objection a failure.

The Lewisian Response and the Avoidance of Arbitrariness

The responses we have so far considered seem, then, to be of only limited value. The arbitrariness and emptiness objections can be expressed so as to be unaffected by these responses. We begin our search for an adequate rejoinder to these objections by examining the Lewisian Response.

When we attempt to think of a person and a law, we are compelled to think of this person either as obeying the law or as making it. And when we think of Him as making it we are compelled to think of Him either as making it in conformity to some yet more ultimate pattern of goodness (in which case that pattern, and not He, would be supreme) or else as making it arbitrarily ... But it is probably just here that our categories betray us. It would be idle, with our merely mortal resources, to attempt a positive correction of our categories. ... But it might be permissible to lay down two negations: that God neither *obeys* nor *creates* the moral law. The good is uncreated; it could never have been otherwise; it has in it no shadow of contingency; it lies, as Plato said, on the other side of existence. [But since only God admits of no contingency, we must say that] God is not merely good, but goodness; goodness is not merely divine, but God.

These may seem like fine-spun speculations; yet I believe that nothing short of this can save us. A Christianity which does not see moral and religious experience converging to meet at infinity ... has nothing, in the long run, to divide it from devil worship.[18]

Lewis seems to be claiming that we must avoid the false dilemma of either putting God above morality or morality above God. In some way, the two must be on the same plane. Lewis' suggestion is that God is goodness or, more precisely, that God is identical with the property of goodness. We may formulate this claim as (G).

(G) God = (His) goodness

The motivation for this seems to be that God, if He exists, is a necessary being and that morality has a similar necessity. Claiming that these "two" necessities are in fact one solves the question of the relationship between these "two" necessities. Lewis's position here is a variant of the doctrine of doctrine of Divine Simplicity, according to which God is identical to His attributes.

At this point, I must confess to not having much idea about what (G) could mean. It asserts an identity relation between God and an abstract object, from which it seems to follow that God is an abstract object, a conclusion that the theist would not be especially keen to endorse. Indeed, this one of the standard objections to the doctrine of divine simplicity.[19]

Lewis's primary aim was to safeguard the modal content of morality while not making God "subject" to the moral law in any objectionable sense. Various alternative ways to achieve this aim suggest themselves.

Firstly, we could claim that if morality has strong modal status, it is no more objectionable to suggest that God is subject to the moral law than that He is "subject" to the laws of logic. Thus we could reject DCT but nevertheless hold that it is necessarily true that all and only those things that God commands are morally right ... for God commands them because they are morally right. Nor need this make God totally irrelevant in moral matters, for one of the things that may be morally right is to honour one's benefactors, of which God is the greatest.[20]

This kind of response may be of particular value for any *analytic* moral truths. If *murder* simply means *wrongful killing*, for example, then the advocate of DCT should surely admit that the truth of *murder is wrong* need not be accounted for along the lines of DCT, and that God's being subject to this "moral truth" is in no way objectionable. However, it seems plausible to suggest that there are moral statements whose modality is not due to their being analytic, and for these we could turn to one of our other options.

Secondly, we might make the standard philosophical move of "rigidifying" our theory. This simply means that we take God's commands in *this world* as definitive of morality in *all possible worlds*. It would still be

possible for God to command other things other than those He had, but in worlds where He did so, those commands would not be morally binding.

Thirdly, making what we will call the *essentialist* response, we could say that just as morality has a strong modal status, so too do God's commands.[21] If certain actions are *necessarily* wrong, that is because God *necessarily* forbids them. Drawing upon our earlier discussion this would seem to mean that God couldn't have just any purpose in creating whatever worlds He creates; He could only have a "morally good" purpose. This is not merely to say that whatever purposes God were to adopt would be morally good (since His purposes are definitive of goodness), but rather to say that God couldn't have adopted those purposes which are (in fact) morally bad. This would be because God is necessarily good, *de re* as well as *de dicto*. [22] The viability of this response to the arbitrariness objection clearly hinges upon there being a better response to the emptiness objection than we have yet seen. But if such a response were available, the resulting position would have significant similarities with that offered by Lewis. According to both pictures, God and His goodness are inseparable: on Lewis's picture because they are identical, on this one because God is essentially good.

Since it seems clear that the first option also avoids the emptiness objection, those who take this course will clearly be immune to the Euthyphro dilemma. But this immunity is only gained at the cost of giving up on a thoroughgoing DCT. The second and third options seem to have some promise, but the viability of each hinges upon there being some better (DCT saving) response to the emptiness objection.

Giving Content to the Goodness of God

In the discussion to this point, the only way we have found to express the goodness of God on DCT is through (GG) which, to remind the reader, looks like this:

(GG) God is good if, and only if, and because, God does as God commands.

Above we voiced the worry that this formula, while not making God's goodness tautologous, did not give it sufficient content to ensure the moral relevance of God's commands: a person's commands shouldn't be taken seriously just because they manage to live up to those commands themselves.

Until this point the discussion has been extremely theoretical, with examples of morally right or wrong acts being used merely for illustrative purposes. It is the theoretical nature of the discussion that makes it hard to see what further content can be given to saying that God is good. How so? Well it has made it easy to ignore the fact that a person is good if they are loving, kind, just, merciful, generous, truthful, patient and the like. Now the truth of DCT in no way entails that God has any of these qualities and so DCT can hardly entail that His possession of them is a tautology.

Combining this with the essentialist strategy, it will, of course, turn out to be necessarily true that God has these features, but since not all necessary truths are analytic truths, this need not worry us. There will still be differences between divine and human goodness, but these will not be so pronounced as the difference would be were (GG) the only content we could give to God's goodness. The main difference is that as applied to God, goodness is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive.[23]

Divine Nature Theory

Assuming that the remarks of the previous section lay the emptiness objection to rest, I will take up the essentialist response to the arbitrariness objection and leave the rigidifying response for others to explore. The essentialist strategy, then, yields a theory that is defined by the following statements.

(DCTa) An action is morally obligatory for a particular agent at a particular time, if and only if, and because, God commands that agent to perform that action at that time.

(DCTb) An action is morally wrong for a particular agent at a particular time, if and only if, and because, God commands that agent to refrain from that action at that time.

(DCTc) An action is morally permitted for a particular agent at a particular time, if and only if, and because, God neither commands that agent to perform that action at that time, nor commands that agent to refrain from that action at that time.

(DCTd) God is essentially good. That is, God is essentially loving, truthful, merciful, patient, generous, and the like.

(DCTe) Since a being with these essential attributes could not command just anything, God's commands have strong modal status.

To these I would like to add the following concerning axiological moral statuses.

(DCTf) An attribute of X is morally good (in a prescriptive sense), if and only if, and because, that attribute is among the attributes of X that God counts as reasons to approve of X.

(DCTg) An attribute of X is morally bad (in a prescriptive sense), if and only if, and because, that attribute is among the attributes of X that God counts as reasons to disapprove of X.

(DCTh) An attribute is morally indifferent (in a prescriptive sense), if and only if, and because, that attribute is among the attributes of X that God neither counts as reasons to approve of X nor to disapprove of X.[\[24\]](#)

(DCTi) Since a being with God's essential attributes could not count just anything as reasons to approve or disapprove of things, God's reasons have strong modal status.

The first three, (DCTa) to (DCTc), simply assert the minimal DCT stated at the outset. (DCTd) adds to this our understanding of God's essential goodness, which in turn supports (DCTe) and (DCTi) according to which God's commands and reasons cannot be arbitrary (i.e. have strong modal status). The latter is important since (DCTf) to (DCTh) assert that axiological moral statuses are dependent upon God's reasons. I call the theory encapsulated in these statements Divine Nature Theory (hereafter DNT), because by securing God's commands and reasons in His character, it effectively makes the divine nature the ultimate standard of moral value.

It remains to be shown that this theory can take advantage of the loophole that we earlier pointed out in Nielsen's argument against Divine Command Theories, but first we must address a preliminary objection. This objection contends that DNT simply relocates the issues raised by the Euthyphro dilemma, and that if this dilemma is appropriately reformulated the problems will resurface. There are various ways in which the dilemma could be reformulated, but I cannot imagine that any such reformulated dilemma having any success.[\[25\]](#) This is because in (DCTd) we have reached God's essential attributes, and cannot sensibly ask *why* He possesses those attributes the dilemma simply does not arise. But in case anyone still has worries let me put another Euthyphro-like dilemma myself. Of any allegedly ultimate moral standard, we can ask the following question:

(ED*) Do actions possessing moral status M possess moral status M because they are endorsed by the allegedly ultimate moral standard, or does the allegedly ultimate moral standard endorse those actions because they possess moral status M?

Which asks us to choose between (ED1*) and (ED2*).

(ED1*) Such-and-such actions possess moral status M because they are endorsed by the allegedly ultimate moral standard.

(ED2*) The allegedly ultimate moral standard endorses such-and-such actions because they possess moral status M.

It might be claimed that if we endorse (ED1*) our alleged standard will be arbitrary, but that if we endorse (ED2*) then there must be some more ultimate moral standard. But then we are heading for an infinite regresses of allegedly ultimate moral standards, each of which would be arbitrary unless legitimated by a higher standard.[26]

But if this shows anything at all, and surely it does, it shows that if there are any moral standards, we must at some point reach an ultimate moral standard beyond which no further standard exists. The defender of DNT claims that this ultimate standard is the nature of God.

We now move to consider Nielsen's argument once more. If DNT is to take advantage of the shortcomings in Nielsen's case, then it must explain – in a way consistent with (DCTa) to (DCTi) – how a person can rationally come to think that God's commands (and/or reasons) are morally relevant.

Nielsen's argument insisted that we cannot rationally think that God's commands are morally relevant unless we can rationally think that God is good. The next part of the argument claimed that we can only judge God to be good by some independently known standard of morality. Were this not the case, were we using a standard derived from God, we would, in effect, be reasoning in a circle, assuming what we are intending to prove. However, if we do use a standard that is not derived from God, then there must be such a standard ... but the forms of DCT we are interested in assert that there is not. So, the argument concludes, either such DCTs are false, or there is no rational way of coming to think that God's commands (reasons) are morally relevant.

The problem with Nielsen's argument is really that he assumes that God's commands have been his only input. But instead, it could be that by making us in His image, God has given us an alternative means to moral knowledge (such as immediate innate knowledge of certain moral truths, or a faculty of intuition through which such truths can be obtained). These two ideas are not mutually exclusive and both maybe incorporated into the position I am outlining here. The basic point is that if either (or both) of these hypotheses were true, the moral beliefs that we would arrive at could be reliably formed, and so would count as knowledge even though we do not (or need not) know their ultimate source. This knowledge could then be used to reason back to the goodness of God. This gives us just what we need in order to advantage of the loopholes in Nielsen's argument, for it makes the metaphysical order of things begin with and in God, while the epistemological order of things begins with us, with the knowledge that God has "implanted" in us.[27]

In case it is not yet clear why this avoids Nielsen's argument let me put things another way. The problem with Nielsen's argument, remember, was that it confused the 'epistemologically prior' with the 'metaphysically prior'. To take advantage of this fact a theistic ethical theory must come up with a way in which someone might 'come across' morality without 'coming across' God – and so could 'come across' morality first. But if God has made us, and made us with an ability to acquire moral truths without prior reference to God's commands then we can 'come across' morality first. Since this supposition clearly is consistent with (DCTa) to (DCTi), Nielsen's objection fails to refute DNT.

Before we move on, I should address a modified version of Nielsen's argument that may be thought more troubling. The reformulated objection contends that we cannot legitimately use the beliefs and faculties that God Himself has given us to reason back to the goodness of God. The objection is best explained through an example.

Imagine that you live in a land whose ruler is an evil tyrant. Unknown to you, this ruler has implanted a microchip into your brain that dictates the kind of thoughts you are able to have. The chip dictates that whenever you turn your thoughts to the ruler it will appear to you that he is 'doing the right thing'. Now suppose that you were to discover the truth about the microchip. Wouldn't this undermine your belief that the ruler was a good man? It would seem so. The objection comes to its conclusion when it is further pointed out that the scenario just imagined and the Divine Nature Theory actually have the same structure. If our beliefs about the ruler are undermined in one case, our beliefs about God must be undermined in the other.

This argument has a certain appeal, and I must grant that it has a valid point. The point is that any explicit justification of my belief that God is good will be circular. But that point can be happily conceded. Circularity need not be vicious, and the kind of circularity involved here is not in any way peculiar to my position. Indeed, any theory that posits objective values will face the same problem, which is essentially a sceptical one. Some sceptical challenges are fair and others are not, and we will clarify the distinction by the use of a couple of examples.

Case 1: The 'Spanish' Tutor

Suppose that in complete ignorance of the language I hire a tutor to teach me Spanish. After much study, all directed by the said tutor, my training is finally complete. In a sceptical moment it strikes me that she might have made it all up, perhaps I haven't been learning Spanish at all. To be sure, I cannot have been learning sheer nonsense, but it might not have been Spanish. My only knowledge that she can speak Spanish comes from her testimony, and from her being able to speak the language that she has taught me.

This 'parallel' case is interesting. My intuition is that if she does speak Spanish (and if this is the language she has been teaching me), then I know Spanish and, if I could shake of my scepticism, I would know that I know Spanish. Obviously, if she doesn't, I don't. I suppose that once the question is raised, the paucity of my evidence is a worry, but then perhaps I could do some further kind of checking, by looking in a Spanish dictionary or something. The problem is that in the God-based-ethics case this checking is not possible, for we are dealing with the final standard of morality, and there is no other point of reference. This difference prevents case one being parallel to the situation with DNT, but it also prevents the challenge to DNT being a fair one. A fair sceptical challenge is one that does not fault a position for not answering questions that no position could be expected to answer. But no position could help us to provide explicit non-circular justifications for all of our moral beliefs, and DNT is no exception here. By their very nature, such global sceptical challenges cannot be completely answered without either allowing epistemic externalism, or a degree of circularity in our justifications, or both. The structure of case two is more nearly parallel to that of DNT.

Case 2: The Metre Stick

In Paris, they hold a rod that is taken to be the standard by which 'metre-hood' is judged. It is a metal bar with a mark near either end. Anything whose length is equal to the distance between these two marks is one metre long. Once all this is granted, it will clearly follow that the distance between these two marks on the bar is one metre. Suppose, however, that someone was unsure; that he did not want to grant that this rod in Paris really is the standard of 'metre-hood'. He first wanted to be sure that the distance between the two marks really is one metre.

Would it pose this figure any real problems if He were to discover (what is not strictly true, but must be true in some more extended sense) that all the other metre sticks he could use to measure the rod in Paris were ultimately derived from the rod he was measuring? Something peculiar would be going on to be sure. But none of this would prevent our man from concluding that the distance between those two marks was one metre. In case two, the sceptical threat has vanished. It seems to me that the same is true of Divine Nature Theory. The only sense in this position is vulnerable to sceptical threats is the sense in which every position is vulnerable.

Essential Goodness and the Attributes of God

The position we have been defending avoids the Euthyphro dilemma by contending that God's commands (and "approval states") are rooted in His essential nature. But this raises two sets of questions: firstly, questions about how God can be praised for moral attributes that He couldn't but possess, and secondly, questions about how God can be omnipotent if He cannot perform actions contrary to His essential nature. The answers that I offer to these important questions are not fully worked out, but in my opinion represent ideas worthy of further consideration.

On the Essential Goodness and the Praiseworthiness of God

The assumption behind the first question is that if A could not have failed to be F, then A cannot rightly be praised for being F. As plausible as the principle sounds, no conclusions inimical to classical theism can be derived from its conjunction with DNT. It seems that we *can* think something or somebody worthy of praise even if it isn't by their choice that they are so worthy – we can admire the beauty of a painting ... or even the elegance of a proof. In a similar way, God is to be admired for who and what He is. Furthermore, the defender of DNT can maintain that God has done many good things that He need not have done, actions that in the human case we would think of as supererogatory. His creation of the spatio-temporal universe is an obvious example. Another would be His promise making (as opposed to His promise keeping).

Moreover, it is precisely the self-sufficient, independent and necessary nature of God's goodness that makes it so remarkable. To praise God is not to congratulate Him for having achieved a remarkably high standard of moral goodness, it is rather to respond to Him in a way appropriate to His greatness. God's greatness is an essential or necessary greatness, and the necessity here may even add to God's greatness.

God's moral greatness consists in the fact that He is essentially loving, truthful, merciful, patient, generous, and the like. His non-moral greatness includes His being all-knowing, all-powerful and the creator and sustainer of all contingent existence. The appropriate response to someone possessing these attributes – whether of necessity or otherwise – is one of awe, wonder, and devotion. This is what the theist has in mind when she says that God is worthy of praise. Perhaps this is a different sense of the word "praise" than that used in the principle above, but this would simply show the principle to be irrelevant here.

On the Essential Goodness and the Omnipotence of God

Various thinkers have contended that if God is omnipotent then He must be able to sin, and that if He is able to sin then He cannot be essentially good. It is not entirely clear that theists should be especially worried by this argument as the New Testament tells us that God cannot lie (Hebrews 6v18), that God cannot be "faithless" (2 Timothy 2v13), and that God cannot be tempted (James 1v13). It is interesting to note that Aquinas held that far from entailing God's ability to sin, God's omnipotence is (part of) what secures His perfect goodness. "To sin," wrote Aquinas, "is to fall short of a perfect action; and hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to the omnipotence of God. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence."[\[28\]](#)

We shall leave this argument aside to discuss another. The most important element in any response to this objection asks whether, other things being equal, a god who is able to sin is truly greater than one who is not. If not then such an ability need not be attributed to the being than which no greater can be conceived, and so need not be attributed to God. One might argue that the ability to sin is not a "great-making" one, in the following fashion:

(GM1) All "great-making" abilities are sometimes worth exercising

(GM2) The ability to sin is never worth exercising

(GM3) Therefore, the ability to sin is not "great-making"

A more sophisticated version of this response could be based on the assumption that sovereignty over the moral realm is more "great-making" than the ability to sin. In that case, if DNT were the only means of safeguarding God's sovereignty over the moral realm, then it would be a straight choice between such sovereignty and the ability to sin ... and the theist would surely be rational in holding God to possess the attribute that makes for the most greatness. Furthermore, if DNT is not the only viable way to secure God's sovereignty over the moral realm, then there must be some other viable response to the Euthyphro dilemma, in which case arguments against DCTs based on that dilemma fail.[\[29\]](#)

Conclusion

The first thing to emphasize is just what this chapter has not demonstrated. It has not shown that Divine Nature Theory or any other form of DCT, is true. Nor has it offered responses to all possible objections to such positions. It has shown, however, that there are versions of DCT which preserve God's sovereignty over the moral realm without falling prey to two popular arguments against such positions: the Euthyphro dilemma, and Nielsen's epistemological argument.

We responded to the Euthyphro dilemma by pointing out that the commands of an omniscient, loving, generous, merciful, patient and truthful being would not be issued without reason, and that since these characteristics are essential to God, His commands possess a strong modal status. It was also observed that God's possession of these attributes is sufficient to give significant content to God's goodness. In the last section of the chapter, we considered various objections according to which DNT, due ascribing essential goodness to God, is incompatible with other traditional theistic doctrines. We showed these charges to be unfounded.

In closing this chapter, I offer the reader the following 'Euthyphro' dilemma: Do you say things are good because they are good, or are they good because you say they are? If the latter, then your moral standard seems to be subjective and arbitrary (and you can't object if God's turns out likewise). However, if you choose the former, then you have to explain where the moral standard comes from ... and Divine Nature Theory is certainly an option!

Notes

[1] There are also various ways in which the "because" could be filled out. The dependence relation it denotes could be a broadly causal relation, a constitutive relation, a supervenience relation, or something else entirely.

[2] This theory has been formulated in terms of token acts, but a similar theory could be constructed for act types.

[3] Philip L. Quinn labels this proposition the Karamazov Thesis in his *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 30. The name derives from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

[4] Plato, *Euthyphro*, in Hugh Tredennick (trans.), *The Last Days of Socrates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 32.

[5] Just prior to the passage quoted, Socrates asks Euthyphro to consider a question: "is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved?" A general form of this question, which could be asked of all formulations of DCT, runs: *Do things have moral status M because they stand in relation R to God, or do they stand in relation R to God because they have moral status M?*

- [6] C.S. Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism" [1943] in *Christian Reflections* (London: Fount, 1981), p. 106.
- [7] Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), pp. 90-1.
- [8] Or, if "God is good" is analytic, then for "God" substitute "the creator" throughout the argument.
- [9] Though there are certain affinities between this argument and Plato's, Nielsen seems to be taking his inspiration here from Kant. A good article on the Kantian argument is Mark Linville's "Euthyphro and His Kin: The Kantian Dilemma for Divine Command Morality" in William Lane Craig and Mark S. McLeod (eds.), *The Logic of Rational Theism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 187-210.
- [10] J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), pp. 130-1.
- [11] Richard Joyce points out that such a conclusion would be "wildly overstated" in "Theistic Ethics and the Euthyphro Dilemma", *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 2002 (30), pp. 49-75.
- [12] See two papers by Stephen J. Sullivan, "Arbitrariness, divine commands, and morality", *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, 1993 (33), pp. 33-45, and "Why Adams Needs to Modify his Divine Command Theory One More Time", *Faith and Philosophy*, 1994 (11), pp. 72-81
- [13] Joyce seems to give an elaborated version of this response in "Theistic Ethics and the Euthyphro Dilemma".
- [14] Paul Rooney offers a response to the arbitrariness objection based upon the conditions of the rationality of ends and of the rationality of means in his paper "Divine Commands and Arbitrariness", *Religious Studies*, 1995 (31), pp. 149-165.
- [15] This reformulation of the arbitrariness objection was inspired by Thomas B. Talbott's "Quinn on Divine Commands and Moral Requirements", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 1982 (13), pp. 193-208.
- [16] I suspect that more than anyone else, the theologian Lewis had in mind here was William Paley. Lewis explicitly links Paley with DCT in the *Problem of Pain* [1954] (London: Fount, 1977), p. 80.
- [17] C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* [1940] (London: Fontana, 1986), p. 54.
- [18] C.S. Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism", pp. 107-8.
- [19] See the interesting response made to this point by James G. Hanink and Gary R. Mar in "What Euthyphro Couldn't Have Said", *Faith and Philosophy*, 1987 (4), pp. 241-61.
- [20] This, in broad outline, is the response to the Euthyphro Dilemma offered by Richard Swinburne in "Duty and the Will of God", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 1974 (4), pp. 213-227. For more on Swinburne's position see T.J. Mawson's "God's creation of morality", *Religious Studies*, 2002 (38), pp. 1-25.
- [21] Essentialism here contrasts with Voluntarism, according to which God could have issued commands radically different from those He has in fact issued. Voluntarism was famously endorsed by William Ockham, among others.

[22] God's *de dicto* necessary goodness consists in the fact that nothing less than perfectly good could be appropriately called God. His *de re* necessary goodness consists in the fact that God (where "God" functions as a proper name) is essentially good.

[23] This approach is taken by Thomas Morris in "Duty and Divine Goodness" in his *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), and by Mark D. Linville in "On Goodness: Human and Divine", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1990 (27), pp. 143-52.

[24] The formulation of (DCT_f) to (DCT_h) owes much to Linda Zagzebski's, "The Virtues of God and the Foundations of Ethics", *Faith and Philosophy*, 1998 (15), pp. 538-53.

[25] Three roughly formulated possibilities suggest themselves: (1) For any moral attribute God possesses, does God possess that attribute because it is a moral virtue, or is that attribute a moral virtue because God possesses it? (2) Does God count His being, for example, *loving* among the reasons for approving of Himself because being loving *is* good, or is His being loving good because God counts it among the reasons for approving of Himself? (3) Is an action in accord with the nature of God because it is good, or is it good because it is in accord with the nature of God?

[26] This line of thinking occurs in William Alston's "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists" in his *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 253-73, and also in Paul Rooney's "Divine Commands, Christian Platonism and God's Nature", *Heythrop Journal*, 1996 (37), pp. 155-75.

[27] See Mark D. Linville, "On Goodness: Human and Divine" and David Basinger, "Kai Nielsen and the Nature of Theistic Ethics", web article accessed on 24th May 2002, <http://www.faithquest.com/home.cfm?main=docs/philosophers/basinger/Ethics.cfm>

[28] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 25, 3 quoted by Charles Taliaferro in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998). Richard Swinburne has argued that God's omniscience and omnipotence jointly entail His goodness. The idea seems to be that since God knows the moral standard, and the moral standard provides reasons to act which override any competing reasons, God could only fail to act according to the moral law if He suffered from weakness of will, an assumption which is incompatible with God's omnipotence.

[29] The general approach here is that offered by George N. Schlesinger in "On the Compatibility of the Divine Attributes", *Religious Studies*, 1987 (23), pp. 539-42.

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