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MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

David O'Connor

What makes a morally right action morally right and a morally wrong action morally wrong? For clarity's sake, let us divide the question. First, what makes a particular action the *morally right action in some situation, that is, what makes it morally obligatory? Second, what makes a particular action* a *(but not* the*) morally right action in some situation, that is, what makes it morally permissible (and optional)? And third, what makes a morally wrong action morally wrong (that is, morally impermissible) in some situation?*

The Euthyphro Dilemma and A Response

It has been and continues to be believed by many that what makes actions morally obligatory, permissible, or wrong, respectively, is the will of the gods or God. On this view – the divine command theory – morally obligatory actions are morally obligatory because God (henceforth, I omit the gods) commands them, morally permissible actions are morally permissible because God does not forbid them, while morally wrong actions are morally wrong because God does forbid them.

Socrates, just before the start of his trial for impiety, among other things, falls into a conversation with the pious Euthyphro, who is at the court to press a charge of wrongful death against his father. In the circumstances, it is unsurprising that they talk about piety or holiness. Socrates wonders about the source of it and, following some discussion, puts a question to Euthyphro: 'Now think of this. Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they

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approve it because it is holy?' Following a fairly standard practice, I will substitute morality for holiness.

As framed in Socrates' question, the issue for a divine command theorist, then as now, is that if she chooses the option that divine commands are the source of moral rightness and wrongness, then moral rightness and wrongness, as well as any role that God might be playing in something as important as morality, seem to be merely arbitrary, but if she chooses the option that God commands morally right actions because they are morally right already and forbids morally wrong actions because they are morally wrong already, then morality seems to be independent of God. Furthermore, if the second option does indeed entail that morality is independent of God, then, if a divine command theorist chooses it, she is no longer a divine command theorist. With the options so interpreted and with those options being the only ones offered, the choice between them is presented to divine command theorists as a dilemma, commonly known as the Euthyphro dilemma.

There is a large secondary literature in which the merits of the proposed dilemma, as well as of the various responses to it, are debated. While there seems to be no consensus that any of the counter-arguments to the dilemma are successful, among recent counter-arguments, those developed by Robert M. Adams and William Lane Craig are influential and widely discussed. A distinction that plays an important underlying role in those and other counter-arguments was articulated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century in a discussion of divine law and natural law, and I will focus on that distinction in this brief discussion of the divine command theory and the Euthyphro dilemma. The distinction is between divine law and divine nature and, in the context of the Euthyphro dilemma and some of the counter-arguments to it, the relevant point is that divine law is said to be based in and to reflect divine nature.

Now the standard theistic conception of the nature of God is that God is essentially and infinitely good, infinitely

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loving, omniscient, omnipotent, and so on. In Robert M. Adams' counter-arguments to the Euthyphro dilemma emphasis is placed on the idea of God as essentially and infinitely loving, while in William Lane Craig's counter-arguments emphasis is placed on the idea of God as essentially and infinitely good. With the latter emphasis, the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness is said to be God's infinite and essential goodness. Let us bring that point to bear on the two options presented to the divine command theorist in the Euthyphro dilemma, with the understanding that another line of counter-argument might be developed from an emphasis on the theistic conception of God as essentially and infinitely loving.

On the Euthyphro dilemma, the first option that is offered to the divine command theorist is that, if actions are morally right or morally wrong, respectively, because they are commanded or forbidden by God then it is just the commanding and the forbidding themselves that alone determine moral rightness and moral wrongness. On that way of looking at the issue, moral rightness and wrongness seem to be arbitrary. But, on the distinction between divine law and divine nature, when God commands or forbids actions, God is not *just* commanding or forbidding actions. Rather, God is commanding or forbidding actions from and on the basis of God's own nature, God's essential and infinite goodness, in particular, which is claimed to be the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness. Thus a counterpoint to the charge of divine arbitrariness is that, on this line of thought, there is no arbitrariness, since, behind and reflected in God's commands, there is the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness.

On the Euthyphro dilemma, the second option offered to the divine command theorist is that, if God commands and forbids morally right and wrong actions, respectively, because they are already morally right and wrong, then moral rightness and wrongness are independent of God. But, again, going on the claim that the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness is the

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infinite goodness of God's own essential nature, the divine command theorist maintains that moral rightness and wrongness are not independent of God, inasmuch as God's own infinitely good nature is not independent of God.

In sum, drawing on the distinction between divine law and divine nature and emphasizing the theistic conception of divine nature as essentially and infinitely good, the divine command theory seems to entail neither moral arbitrariness nor morality's independence of God, since a third option that avoids both seems to be available. Thus viewed, the Euthyphro dilemma may be a false dilemma.

It may be worth noting that, for this third option to be available, the two statements at the base of the version of it sketched out here, namely, that God is essentially and infinitely good and that God's essential goodness is the ultimate and universal standard of morality, do not have to be true. After all, if there is no God, they are not true (or, arguably, false either). The third option will be available if it is plausible to say that those two core statements in it are true, if theism is true, that is, if God exists.

As noted, there does not seem to be a consensus that the foregoing, or any other, counter-argument to the Euthyphro dilemma is successful. Here, however, we do not need to adjudicate that issue. For our purpose here, the two following points are enough: first, that theism has available to it the conceptual resources to make a principled distinction between divine commands and divine nature, with the latter understood to be the ultimate standard of moral goodness, badness, rightness, and wrongness, and, second, that that distinction may open a way to the needed third option. We will come back to that possible option presently.

Moral Relativism

It has been and continues to be believed by many that it is the beliefs about behavior, the customs, the social practices, and so on, developed and solidified over time, of a

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society or of a culture, that solely determine moral rightness and wrongness in and for that society or culture. When conjoined to the two following points, this view is moral relativism – the theory that morality is essentially local, not universal, that there is no common morality. The first of the two additional points is that, among societies and cultures, there are different beliefs about behavior, different customs, different social practices and so on, and the second point is that there is no way to establish that any one set of such beliefs, customs, practices and so on is objectively either the right standard of morality in a universal sense, or the best standard among those available, or a better standard than some other, or even a good or the right standard for that society or culture. On the moral relativist theory, then, what is morally obligatory in one society or culture may be morally optional or even forbidden in another, and there is no meta-societal or meta-cultural moral viewpoint from which such differences in moral values and practices can be compared or ranked. The ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, quotes Pindar's aphorism, 'Custom is King', to get to the heart of the theory.

Moral Relativism and The Euthyphro Dilemma (1)

The moral relativist point that the only thing determining whether actions are morally obligatory, permissible, or wrong, respectively, is the established beliefs about behavior, the customs, the practices, and so on of a society or of a culture, prompts a variation on Socrates' question. It is: Are the morally obligatory, permissible and forbidden actions in or for a society or culture morally obligatory, permissible and forbidden, respectively, because the society or culture says that they are or does the society or culture say that they are because of recognizing them as already morally obligatory, permissible, or forbidden? If a moral relativist chooses the first option, she seems to be committing herself to the view that morality is arbitrary, but if she chooses the second option, she seems to be giving up

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moral relativism. Of course, things may not be what they seem, but at face value there is enough in this variation on the dilemma that Socrates puts before Euthyphro to challenge moral relativists to find a principled way either out of or around it, that is, to find a third option. This being so, let us go back to the argument that, by distinguishing between divine commands and divine nature, a third option opens up for divine command theorists facing the Euthyphro dilemma. Let us go back to it, first, to see if a parallel distinction between the moral commands of a society or culture and the nature and moral standards of that society or culture is available to moral relativists, and if so, second, to see if it opens up a third option.

As noted, two key points in the moral relativist theory are that the standards of moral rightness and wrongness in and for a given society or culture are encoded in and expressed by the established beliefs about behavior, by the customs, the social practices, and so on of that society or culture and that what is commanded or forbidden in a society or culture reflects those standards. The conjunction of those two points seems to be parallel to the conjunction of the two points that the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness is the nature of God and that divine commands reflect that standard. Thus, a principled distinction between a society's or culture's commands and the moral standards of that society or culture seems to be available to the moral relativist. The question now is whether this distinction between moral commands and moral standards points to a third option that will enable the moral relativist theory to get around our variation on the Euthyphro dilemma.

The answer seems to be 'no'. The reason is that, according to moral relativism, as we saw, among societies and cultures there are many different sets of social and cultural beliefs, customs, practices, and so on, and there is no objective way either to rank them relative to each other or to determine that one set is the right set. Thus, while the moral relativist can anchor a society's or culture's moral

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commands in that society's or culture's own moral standards, there seems to be no basis for those standards themselves. That is, on moral relativism, the standards of moral rightness and wrongness in a given society or culture seem to be arbitrary. By contrast, the generic argument on behalf of the divine command theory that we examined earlier grounds divine commands in what, according to the theism implicit in that theory, is the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness, namely, God's essential and infinitely good nature.

An attempt by a moral relativist to validate her own society's or culture's moral standards as either objectively good standards or the right standards would seem to require appealing to a standard independent of the beliefs about behavior, the customs, practices, and so on of her society or culture, a step that is ruled out on moral relativism. Such an attempt by a moral relativist would entail giving up moral relativism. So, a distinction modeled on the distinction between divine commands and the standard of moral rightness and wrongness that is supposedly implicit in the nature of God does not appear to open up the needed third option for moral relativists.

As noted, those points about an ultimate and universal moral standard and about its being implicit in the nature of God may not be true. But, as noted, that possibility is not relevant in our present discussion. What is relevant is that the point about God's nature as the ultimate and universal standard of moral rightness and wrongness is already embedded in (at least some versions of) theism, and as such is available to a theistic divine command theorist. And, as stipulated at the outset, it is the theistic, not polytheistic, form of the divine command theory that is under discussion here.

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In sum, if a third option of the sort sketched out above in my opening section is available to the divine command theory confronted with the Euthyphro dilemma, then, insofar as that sort of third option is concerned, the moral relativist theory seems to be more vulnerable to our variation on Socrates' question than the divine command theory is to the original question. Or, if there is no such third option available to the divine command theory, then, insofar as such an option is concerned, the moral relativist theory seems to be as vulnerable to our variation on Socrates' question as the divine command theory seems to be to the original. Of course, there may be third options of different sorts available to either or both theories facing a Euthyphro dilemma, but that possibility is beyond the scope of our discussion here.[1]

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Note

[1] Without tying him to my thesis or argument, I am grateful to Stephen Law for a useful suggestion.

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