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Euthyphro's Dilemma and Divine Command Ethics

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Abstract

Euthyphro, one of the Greek philosopher Plato's earliest dialogues (about 380 B.C.), presents a dilemma that has troubled philosophers and theologians for centuries. The quandary is provoked by an assertion Euthyphro makes about piety in conversation with Socrates. Euthyphro is planning to prosecute his father for an unintentional murder to avoid being associated with him. He hopes that this will help his standing with the gods. Socrates shows great surprise at Euthyphro's apparent knowledge of "religion and things pious and impious." This leads to a discussion concerning the nature of piety, where Euthyphro proposes that whatever is pious and holy is that which is loved by the gods. Socrates then confronts him with the question, "Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?" (Plato, 2003, p 24). At this point Euthyphro is puzzled, and although neither he nor Socrates come to a formal conclusion, Socrates clearly favors the first alternative (Wainwright, 2005). This paper will develop an argument for the position that "something is holy because it is loved by the gods," however this argument works on the premise that there is one God who is omnipotent, therefore changing the assertion to "what is good and right is only good and right because God commands it." Two issues concerning divine command theory will be addressed: the problem of abhorrent acts and the depraved state of humanity. These will be used to argue for the impossibility of God commanding anything abhorrent, and the inability of humanity to come to a clear conclusion concerning the relationship between God, right, and wrong.

Keywords

Ethics, divine command theory

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Euthyphro's Dilemma and Divine Command Ethics

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Euthyphro, one of the Greek philosopher Plato's earliest dialogues (about 380 B.C.), presents a dilemma that has troubled philosophers and theologians for centuries. The quandary is provoked by an assertion Euthyphro makes about piety in conversation with Socrates. Euthyphro is planning to prosecute his father for an unintentional murder to avoid being associated with him. He hopes that this will help his standing with the gods. Socrates shows great surprise at Euthyphro's apparent knowledge of "religion and things pious and impious." This leads to a discussion concerning the nature of piety, where Euthyphro proposes that whatever is pious and holy is that which is loved by the gods. Socrates then confronts him with the question, "Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?" (Plato, 2003, p 24). At this point Euthyphro is puzzled, and although neither he nor Socrates come to a formal conclusion, Socrates clearly favors the first alternative (Wainwright, 2005). This paper will develop an argument for the position that "something is holy because it is loved by the gods," however this argument works on the premise that there is one God who is omnipotent, therefore changing the assertion to "what is good and right is only good and right because God commands it." Two issues concerning divine command theory will be addressed: the problem of abhorrent acts and the depraved state of humanity. These will be used to argue for the impossibility of God commanding anything abhorrent, and the inability of humanity to come to a clear conclusion concerning the relationship between God, right, and wrong.

An argument often used against divine command theory is the problem of abhorrent acts. Divine command supports the possibility of God being able to command abhorrent acts if He so chooses, which would mean (for example) that murder, rape, and genocide would be morally acceptable. There are three ways divine command theorists might respond to this. First, some would say that God's will is in some way constrained, therefore making it impossible for Him to command abhorrent acts. This implies that there are moral acts that are bad before God wills what to do or that there is a standard of goodness that God does not will, but that He meets. Second, in response to the first response, philosophers like Robert Adams would say divine command theory is only contingently true. For example, divine command theory is true as long as God is benevolent. Third, one can respond to the problem of abhorrent commands by accepting that if God did in fact command abhorrent acts, they would be morally good. William of Ockham is infamous for promoting this idea. Many find this third position daunting. However, it hangs together logically the best of the three responses (Holt, 2003).

In response to Ockham's extreme position that there are no limits on God, many would question whether God would command something abhorrent, as stated earlier. If God were to mandate something dreadful like genocide or child abuse, then that would make him arbitrary in nature, since he has already mandated good things. If God is arbitrary, that would mean that He is not constant, therefore making it impossible to know or identify any of his characteristics. Therefore, since what one can know about God has been constant thus far, God is not arbitrary (Wilkens,

1995). Furthermore, presupposing Biblical authority, if God is truth (as Jesus states in John 14:6) then God cannot lie. If God cannot lie, and He has already made promises and fulfilled them, making His character congruent with His actions; then God will never command us to do what He has deemed corrupt.

What is considered corrupt or sinful in this world is only a distortion of the good that God has created; therefore good and evil cannot be viewed as two opposing forces at either end of a spectrum. Evil must be viewed as a parasite that feasts on good things, corrupting them; therefore nullifying the statement that God could arbitrarily choose to commit or command evil acts the same way he can commit or command good ones.

Next, consider human limitation within divine command ethics. This is vital to understanding and coming to a conclusion regarding Euthyphro's dilemma. If one presupposes that humans are finite, it is much easier to accept the idea that something is right because God commanded it. Humans do not know the mind of God, nor do they have the capacity to question His rules for the universe; therefore they cannot declare God's rules arbitrary if they do not have the capacity to understand the logic behind them. Wilkens states that many divine command ethicists build their arguments on this proposition: "While there may be a logic to God's action and decrees, it is presumptuous for humans to believe that our finite minds can discover it" (1995, p. 173).

Augustine, in his 397 A.D. work *Confessions*, writes "Who am I and what am I? What was not wicked in my deeds – or, if not in my deeds, then in my words, or if not in my words then in my intentions?" (Augustine, 2001, p. 70). In this, he is referring to his totally depraved state, and that no action apart from God would be untainted by sin. Augustine also addresses faith and reason extensively. Bourke states; "the source of Augustine's views on faith and reason is a text from Isaias (7:9, Septuagint), which simply says, 'Unless you will have believed, you will not understand'" (Groeschel, 1995, p. 44). Groeschel states; "Augustine's love for divine and immutable truth is passionate and deep. It is also based completely on Christian faith" (p. 54). These statements show that Augustine presupposed that knowledge of God could not be obtained without belief or faith in God. Combining Augustine's view of humanity (depraved) and dependence on faith for knowledge, one can understand Paul's statement in Romans 11:34, "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (ESV) Under the assumption that humanity is, in fact, finite, is it even legitimate to question any act of God as abhorrent? If Jesus demonstrates God's character to humanity, then His declaration "I am the way, the truth, and the life" establishes his authority to create and define what is morally good. In his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses conflict over the role of the law in salvation and states that there are none righteous, not even one (3:10-18). As much as one should strive to act as Christ commanded, one cannot do it on his own. This is made clear by the people of Israel's utter failure to be God's agents of reconciliation to the nations; they could not do it by their own power. Presupposing that the Bible holds authority, humanity is totally depraved apart from God; therefore humanity does not even have the capacity or authority to declare whether God created right and wrong or is separate from it.

These two arguments, the impossibility of God commanding anything abhorrent and the limitations of humanity, are vital to understanding divine command ethical theory. This argument does have some weaknesses, since one must presuppose the authority of Scripture for it to work. This limits the number of scholars who take this argument seriously. Despite this, using Scripture

lends great insight into the character of God. Identifying aspects of God's character through Scripture allows one to grasp the fullness of His nature and to see that there is nothing arbitrary about anything God does. In the same way, Scripture helps us understand the fallen state of Creation and the need for restoration. This need for restoration is what inhibits humanity from understanding the mind of God, but it is also what creates Creation's need for Him, and therefore our reliance on divine command.

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