

Paper 1, Option 2

Aaron Klapheck

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Professor Garrett

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Divine Morality

God's commands are always moral, so by following them we are performing the pious actions or, using more modern terminology, "right actions." This statement is echoed in Plato's Euthyphro; God's commands are right because of some important property that only God has the capability of fully understanding. This "right property" is determined by the positive effect the action will have on the souls of the persons affected by the action, directly or indirectly.

Part 1. In establishing right actions in relation to the commandments of God, a proper identification of God is necessary. The God spoken of must be a monotheistic God, the "one and only" God. This belief of God is most commonly identified in Jew-Dao-Christian beliefs of God. This premise is necessary because polytheistic Gods may disagree and so deliver differing commandments. If the polytheistic Gods are in agreement with all their commandments, as was the case in Socrates' Euthyphro, then they may simply be viewed as a monotheistic God, in which case the premise still applies (Garrett, slide 6).

In the Euthyphro, Socrates states that there are two ways to consider an action to be right. First, a right action is considered right *because* God commands it. Second, a right action is right because of some other property that God recognizes and therefore commands. For the first consideration, an action is considered right because God has *willed* the action to be right. This viewpoint assumes that there is nothing greater than God's will (Garrett, slide 13). This

assumption must be made, because if there was some other reason beyond God's will that the action was considered "right," then the second viewpoint would be the correct one. This first viewpoint also implies that God has the ability or power to make an action previously considered wrong, right by willing it to be so.

The second viewpoint states that there are some reasons than an action can be considered right beyond the fact that God has simply commanded it. This means that God does not have the power to make an action right, or conversely make an action wrong, but simply recognizes the inherent properties that make up a right action. This implies that God's will has inherent bounds – God is not all-powerful – that is, if an action is inherently wrong, God cannot make that action right by *willing* it to be so. This also assumes that right actions have some inherent property that makes them right. Assuming there is a "right property" – a property that makes an action right – there would therefore have to be a way to quantify this property or, at the very least, identify it. These two conflicting viewpoints also have larger ramifications, which may put into question their soundness.

Part 2. Despite the strong footing these viewpoints are built upon, they are not without their detractors. If actions are right *because* God commands them, then God's commands are arbitrary. Having no inherent properties that make acts good, God is free to command any action He sees fit, thus making His commands arbitrary (Garrett, slide 15). If God is thus not guided by reasoning then, there must be some other aspect upon which He makes His decisions. By eliminating reason and the rational, God's commands must rely on something that is inherently irrational such as emotion. If God's commands were this fickle, that they should change based on something arbitrary, then His suggested actions would be no better than those of any man. For a man can arbitrarily choose actions just as easily as God can. But if God's commands are

irrational then obeying them would be folly for most men will not choose actions based on something arbitrary but instead tries to use their reason to figure out what actions should be taken. And by this reasoning process, a man may be considered wise by choosing the correct action in a difficult situation.

Another argument against God's commands being solely left up to His will is that God is good. The human mind has the ability to understand what good and bad are and how to recognize an act as being either good or bad on a basic level. But by saying that good is whatever God's commands are, then we are stripping God of all His greatness and glory. As humans we can recognize a good action based on the effects the action has, so by simply saying that God's commands are good because they are His commands, we ignore the inherent goodness in His commands. This not only allows for circular reasoning, but why would we praise and glorify God for His good commands if we would do the same if His commands were changed to be the opposite. We praise God as good *because* His commands have an inherent property of goodness to them.

However, there are a number of arguments for why there is no such property that makes an action good. One argument is that if there are properties of an action that make it good or bad then God's power is limited. In other words, if an action has certain properties that make it wrong then God does not have the power to make that action right. In this stance morality is outside the control of God. If God commands actions for a reason then it is this reason that makes the actions right not that fact that God commanded it. The reason an action can be classified as good or bad must be based on the nature of the action. For if an action is right for a reason, and this reason has nothing to do with the action, then no action can be considered good or bad for the reason has been separated from the action. Thus an action is chosen by God for a

reason and this reason must relate to a property of the action. Consequently, God can only command acts that have this property of goodness and He does not have the power to do otherwise. And if God is not all-powerful then He a weak God whose only power consists of asking us to do things that He has not control over.

Part 3. Despite the “limited” powers of God, the view that actions have a property of rightness is the correct one. The argument that God’s all-powerfulness is dependant on the amount of control He has over us is flawed. This can be demonstrated in an example. A given landlord is in charge of a large province which consists of many cattle, crops, and workers. This man is considered to be very powerful and influential. However, if this lord had to control every action of every one of his workers this man would not be considered powerful for his power would consist of directing others in minute detail. The life of this lord would therefore not be described as one of power but as one of drudgery.

To state that God’s power is limited because He can only command things that are inherently right, is also flawed. Let us again use the example of the landlord to demonstrate this flaw. Let us assume that the lord is not obligated to command in all things, but only gives a limited number of commands, which is a situation much more familiar to us. Would this ruler be considered weak if he commanded his subjects to love one another, not to murder, or not to steal? No, this ruler would be considered wise and powerful still. However, if a ruler were to command his subjects to murder each other, to lie, to cheat, or to steal, would this ruler be considered more powerful because he is not limiting himself in the commands he can give? No, this ruler would be considered foolish, and if his subjects were to follow these foolish commands this lord would soon have no subjects to command. Thus we see that power does not come from the amount of control a ruler has over his subjects nor the variety of commands he can give but is

instead shown as executing the “proper” amount of control over his stewardship and by making commands that are wise and proper.

However, this then begs the question: what is the “right property”? This property must have the following characteristics: One, the “right property” is universal for all moral actions, at all times, in all places, and involving any given number of persons. Two, although being present in all right actions, the “right property” may be present in degrees (e.g. some actions are more right than others). Three, the “right property” must at least be identifiable, at best quantifiable. Thus with these conditions of the “right property” in place the definition is now needed. This property of all moral actions is the positive effect the action will have on the souls of the persons affected by the action, either directly or indirectly. The “soul” used here is defined as that part of a person which gives them the ability to make moral, ethical, and just decisions. The soul is also assumed to be physical, e.g. not spiritual, perhaps located in some portion of the mind.

This definition of the “right property” is best clarified through example. It is clear that the act of murder is wrong because the person who is killed is no longer able to make moral and ethical decisions, their body being destroyed, thus harming their soul. But what of little acts such as sneezing? These acts are involuntary and therefore have no inherently “right property” to them but instead must be used in context. For if the person committing the act of sneezing does so into a sleeve or handkerchief that act contains the “right property” because it shows that this person is concerned for the health of others and thus their souls. Whereas if this individual sneezes into the air or onto another person then this person, and possibly others, may become ill and, once in an ill state, their ability to perform actions to the benefit of others will be limited and thus their souls will be harmed.

But where this definition is truly put to the test is when choosing between two good acts such as giving money to the homeless directly, or giving it to a homeless shelter. This is where the quantify-ability of the “right property” comes into play, for one act will always have more of the rightness property than another. However, the ability to quantify the “right property,” perhaps in terms of the number and magnitude of the souls it will positively effect, involves knowledge of future events which cannot be predict in detail. Thus we say that God’s commands are good because he is the only being capable of seeing how our actions will affect the souls of others.

God commands acts because these acts contain a “right property.” This property is contained fundamentally in all moral acts. It is not because God makes acts right or wrong through His will, but that God is the only being capable of recognizing the “right property” in all of its glorious detail. This recognition only comes through a full understanding of the souls of man and how specific actions may affect them. This does not mean that we should abdicate our reasoning when deciding which actions to perform, for our past experience and study of history will aid us in understanding this “right property.” This is the reason God has commanded us to read the Bible and learn from the decisions these people have made, so that we may better recognize this “right property.” Thus it is through living God’s commands and developing our own recognition of this “right property” that we can truly live the good life.

References (MLA 2004 Referencing Standards)

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