

24.231 Ethics – Handout 1 Plato, “The Euthyphro”

I. Plato’s Dialogue

Plato’s Question:

What is it to be pious?

- He is not looking for a list of things that are pious
- He is not looking for a property that (even all) pious things have.

Euthyphro’s (best?) answer:

To be pious is to be loved by all the gods.

Plato’s Argument against Euthyphro’s answer:

Perhaps all and only those things/actions that are loved by the gods are pious. But why is that? Are pious things loved by the gods because they are pious, or are they pious because they are loved by the gods?

Socrates and Euthyphro agree that they must be loved by the gods *because* they are pious.

But, says Socrates, in that case, being pious cannot be the same thing as being god-beloved. Because something that is god-beloved is so *because* it is loved by the gods. But something that is pious isn’t so *because* it is loved by the gods; rather, it is loved by the gods *because* it is pious. Being loved by the gods *causes* god-belovedness, but being loved by the gods *does not cause* piety. So god-belovedness and piety cannot be the same thing.

(This kind of argument will be relevant again in the selection from Moore that we’re reading for Wednesday.)

II. The “Euthyphro Problem”

Socrates’ question about whether what’s loved by the gods is pious because it is loved by them, or loved by them because it is pious, forms the lynchpin of an important contemporary debate about what moral philosophers call “Divine Command Theory.”

According to DCT, morally good actions are good *because* they are commanded by God. But this invites a question: Why does God command those actions?

One answer (Socrates’s) is that God commands them *because* they are good. But if this is so, DCT must be wrong, because then there must be an independent standard of goodness that God uses to decide which actions are good.

But what if we instead say that there is no such independent standard – that God’s will determines which actions are good: the good ones are good *because* he has commanded them?

This answer avoids the problem of the independent standard. But it seems to invite three new problems:

(1) The problem of *arbitrariness*:

Since, according to this answer, God can’t be deciding what to command on the basis of what is morally good (since this has yet to be determined), his decision seems *arbitrary* – we might worry he’s commanding on a whim. But in general, commands issued on a whim and for no good reason do not generate moral obligations. Why think we have reason to follow the arbitrary commands of a whimsical God?

(2) The problem of *triviality*:

We might be tempted to say that God wills as he does because he is good. But if, as DCT claims, God’s will is the source of goodness, to say God is good-willed is just to say that God’s will is as he wills it to be. But that seems (at least close to) tautologous – it seem like an empty claim. And we would have thought that divine command theorists intended to say something more substantive than this when they called God good-willed... (But it’s worth noting the claim that God’s will is as he wills it to be is not quite a tautology...)

(3) The problem of *abhorrent commands*:

If God’s will determines what actions are good, and there are no independent moral standards guiding God’s choice of what to command, then DCT seems to entail that God could have commanded us to rape, murder, and pillage, and then those actions would have been good. But that seems clearly false – those actions, surely, could never have been good.

Relatedly, it seems like once we fix all of an actions “natural” properties – how much pain it causes, and who commits it, and why, and when, and whether any promises were broken, etc., that should be enough to determine it’s moral properties: whether or not it’s good. It doesn’t seem like a good action might have had all the same natural properties but might not have been good. But DCT seems to contradict this: DCT suggests that had God willed differently, the same action that is in fact good might have been bad, despite having all of the same natural properties.

Replies: The proposal that God doesn’t command according to an independent moral standard needn’t entail his commands are arbitrary – e.g., perhaps he commands as he does out of love; and a loving God might not have been capable of issuing abhorrent commands. And perhaps a divine command theorist could hold that if God had not been loving, his commands would not have given rise to moral obligations...? (But why think this, if not because we think only a loving God’s commands would live up to independent standards of goodness?)

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