

GOODNESS AND GOD'S WILL

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The view that we can identify the moral goodness of an action with God's will is generally held to be open to insuperable objections. It is thought that these objections establish not simply that the goodness of an action and God's will are not in fact identical but that it is a conceptual error to suppose they could be. Consequently a theistic meta-ethic receives little sympathy in philosophical discussions and is generally mentioned only to be quickly dismissed. My purpose in this article is to suggest that such dismissal is premature.

The classic objection to a theistic meta-ethic is found in Plato's *Euthyphro* where he has Socrates ask the question: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?"¹ Later ethicists have put the question somewhat differently, suggesting that it is illegitimate to derive statements of obligation from statements of fact.² Any attempt to identify the moral goodness of an action with God's will is bound to fail, therefore, since it will always be possible to ask the question whether what God wills is always good.³

This objection is generally formulated in such a manner as to suggest that the theist errs in supposing there exists, or even could conceivably exist, a nonaccidental relation between fact and value. Put this way, however, the objection begs an important question. It presumes that we can

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¹ Plato *Euthyphro* 10a; cf. *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns; Princeton: Princeton University, 1961).

² Perhaps the most famous attack is that of D. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge; Oxford: Clarendon, 1964 [1888]) 469-470: "In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality."

³ This is sometimes known as the "further question" argument and is associated with G. E. Moore's comment that "whatever definition [of good] be offered, it may always, with significance, of the complex so defined, be asked whether it is itself good." *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965 [1903]) 15.

easily think of (1) facts as some sort of brute given and (2) value as something extra added by the subject—a view that, naturally enough, leads to the suspicion that valuation is arbitrary and devoid of all foundation. But it is far from obvious that this view is correct. Examination of our moral experience reveals that it is no easy matter to separate fact and value in the way required. A. E. Taylor seems right in his comment that

the ideals of good which in actual history move men to great efforts only move so powerfully because they are not taken to be an addition imposed on the facts of life, but to be the very bones and marrow of life itself. Behind every living morality there is always the conviction that the foundation of its valuation is nothing less than the “rock of age,” the very bedrock out of which the whole fabric of things is hewn.⁴

But even if the possibility of an intrinsic connection between existence and value is admitted, how is the theist to argue that the rightness of an action can be identified with God’s will? Does not the fact that an atheist, no less than a sincere believer, can have a deep sense of morality demonstrate the falsity of the theist’s proposal? How could the theistic meta-ethic be correct if someone who does not believe in God’s existence can nevertheless distinguish right from wrong?

This objection is often regarded as a conclusive refutation of the theist’s claim, but its force is greatly overestimated. What its adherents have overlooked is that analogous objections in other areas of philosophy are generally recognized as fallacious. By way of example, consider the mind-body identity theory. Early critics sometimes charged that it was a conceptual error to suppose that mental events could be identical to certain brain events, since it is possible for someone to know a great deal about mental events but nothing about brain events. The reply made to these critics was that we must distinguish between sense and reference. To use the standard example, the fact that the expression “morning star” and the expression “evening star” do not mean the same does not imply they do not refer to the same thing—that is, the planet Venus. Similarly the fact that the expression “mental event” has a different meaning than the expression “brain event” and that it is possible to talk about mental events yet know nothing about brain events does not imply that the two do not refer to the same thing. If on the basis of this distinction between sense and reference it is not nonsense to think brain events and mental events might be identical, neither is it nonsense to suggest that the moral goodness of an action might be identical with God’s will. The fact that someone who disbelieves in God can nevertheless distinguish between right and wrong no more invalidates the theistic meta-ethic than the fact that someone who knows nothing about brain processes can nevertheless be familiar with mental processes invalidates the identity theory.

So far we have established that there is no conceptual error in claiming that the moral goodness of an action could conceivably be identified with

⁴ A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (London: Macmillan, 1932) 61.

God's will. It is important to remember, however, that this claim, if true, is only contingently true—that is, its denial is not self-contradictory. This seems to leave the theist vulnerable to what is known as the “further question” argument. Faced with the question “How do we know such an identity exists?” how is the theist to reply in a nonquestion-begging way?

Two comments are in order. First, the fact that we can raise the question “How do we know that this proposed identity exists?” does not in itself count against the theistic meta-ethic. We cannot, for example, disprove the claim that the morning star and the evening star are identical simply by asking whether it is really true that they are identical. This seems an obvious point, but it is worth making since the “further question” argument is often formulated in such a manner that it suggests that the mere fact we can raise this question refutes the theist. To formulate it in this way is to transform a legitimate request for justification of the theist's claim into a question-begging assumption that the claim is unjustified. Further, employed in this way it constitutes not only a rejection of the possibility of the theistic meta-ethic but any meta-ethic whatever. As Stephen Clark comments:

If God's commands cannot be the source of moral duty (on the plea that it might be the case that He commanded something now believed to be wrong), then even the moral law itself (considered as being independent even of God's action) cannot be the source of moral duty . . . It is not simply God's law that is incompatible with a decent moral autonomy, but the Moral Law itself! Accordingly, calling something “good” is not . . . to offer a reason for approving of it: it is simply to express such approval . . . The very same charge remains if something were . . . good just in that it matched . . . [one's] sentiments of approval, . . . [one] would have to agree that if [one's] sentiments changed (and they are a lot more likely to than God's) [one] . . . would call “good” what [one] . . . now calls “evil” (and not be “objectively” mistaken)

Both ordinary moral realism and emotivism, in short, are vulnerable to just the same charge as a divine command morality. The theist is criticized for being ready to obey God no matter what. why is a moral realist not to be criticized likewise? Both would commit acts of torture if it turned out that these were required by their ultimate standard of behaviour, though both would be very unlikely to agree that they were . . . The theist is supposed to concede that other things might turn out to be required of her than she now supposes, the . . . [emotivist] is bound to admit that her feelings may change, that what she now thinks fine she may, with as much reason, soon think base.⁵

Second, the claim that the moral goodness of an action is identical with God's will is theory-bound. It depends for its plausibility upon the overall plausibility of theism as a worldview. This difficulty is not peculiar to the theist, however, since any contingent claim concerning identity will only be judged plausible on the basis of some large-scale theory. Thus, for example, neither the claim that the evening star and the morning star are identical nor the claim that mental events are identical with brain events

⁵ S. Clark, “God's Law and Chandler,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987) 201–202

would prove plausible in the absence of a theory that justifies linking these apparently different things.

The fact that contingent identity claims derive their plausibility from a large-scale theory in which they are embedded explains how to some philosophers an identity claim can seem to be radically question-begging while to others it seems almost a necessary truth. If one is not a materialist the assumption that mental events and brain events are identical is bound to seem question-begging, but if one is a materialist, unless one is prepared by means of behaviorism or a critique of folk psychology to do away with mental events altogether, the claim that they are identical with brain events will seem almost beyond doubt. Similarly, if one is not a theist the claim that the moral goodness of an action can be identified with God's will will seem question-begging, but to the theist it will seem eminently reasonable in view of his belief that God cannot be subordinate to some sort of Platonic idea of goodness outside of himself.

In a sense I am saying nothing very surprising. It should scarcely come as a shock that a theistic meta-ethic will only seem plausible if theism seems plausible. There is, however, a more subtle point to be made—namely, that a theistic meta-ethic cannot be pronounced implausible until it is demonstrated that theism is implausible. Critics often miss this point. They frame examples in which the theist is asked to accept that God has commanded something obviously immoral and then asked to give up the apparently absurd claim that God's will can be identified with the moral rightness of an action. This is to forget that if theism is true the theist has good reason to believe that such counterexamples will never arise. In reply to the critic the theist can simply maintain that God's will is not something arbitrary but an expression of his nature, and his nature is not such that he would will what the critic suggests.

A critic might be tempted to object that the theist has no right to make the move I have just suggested. Surely, to borrow Patrick Nowell-Smith's way of putting it, "there is nothing in the idea of an omnipotent omniscient creator which, by itself, entails his goodness."⁶ How, unless she possesses prior knowledge of what is right, can the theist argue that God's nature is not such that he might will something morally wrong?

Underlying this objection is the assumption that if we can know that an act is morally right independent of knowing that God exists this invalidates the theistic meta-ethic. As I have already mentioned, I see no reason to grant this assumption. The theistic meta-ethic, at least in the form that I am defending, is not a claim about meaning but about reference. The fact that the expression "morally right" does not seem to mean the same as the expression "God's will" does not, therefore, refute the theist. To insist that it does would rule out not only the theistic meta-ethic but a host of identity claims we generally accept. Neither must it be forgotten that the word "means" is somewhat ambiguous, inasmuch as it can refer

⁶ P. H. Nowell-Smith, "Morality: Religious and Secular," *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (ed. I. T. Ramsey; London: SCM, 1966) 97.

either to the ordinary usage of a term or to a theoretical definition or to some combination of both. As Robert Merrihew Adams notes:

The chemist, who believes that water is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen, and the man who knows nothing of chemistry, surely do not use the word "water" in entirely different senses; but neither is it very plausible to suppose that they use it with exactly the same meaning.⁷

Rejecting the theistic meta-ethic on the basis that ordinary usage of the term "good" could proceed with no mention of God's will is analogous to rejecting that water is identical to H₂O on the basis that ordinary usage of the term "water" could proceed with no mention of H₂O. Therefore the claim that goodness would not exist if God did not exist is no more conceptually absurd than the claim that water would not exist if H₂O did not exist.

Perhaps part of the reason there exists a tendency to reject prematurely the theistic meta-ethic lies in the fact that it is very easy to misconstrue the theist's proposal. Faced with the suggestion that the moral rightness of an action can be identified with God's will, we deem it very natural to pose Socrates' question and ask whether an act is good because God wills it or God wills an act because it is good. Natural though this question seems, to pose it is to misunderstand the theist's claim of identity, since if two things are identical one cannot be the cause of the other. God's will is no more the cause of the goodness of an action than the evening star is the cause of the morning star. What is true on the theist's account is that any action willed by God is good and any good action is one willed by God, just as any object that is the evening star is also the morning star and any object that is the morning star is also the evening star.⁸

The proposal I have been defending concerning how the theistic meta-ethic is to be construed fits very nicely with how religious believers approach ethical issues on a day-to-day basis. Generally, recognizing that an action is morally good the believer will conclude that that action is the will of God on the basis that what is good is also God's will. Implicit in this judgment is the belief that man is made in the image of God and that the ability to recognize what is good is the ability to discern God's will. Sometimes, though, the believer may find himself in a puzzling situation and pray for guidance, confident that if an action is God's will then it is morally correct. Implicit in this judgment is the belief that man's knowledge is limited and that to discern the will of God is to know what is

⁷ R. M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays* (ed. G. Outka and J. P. Reeder Jr., New York: Anchor, 1973) 345

⁸ If the critic wants to insist that the theistic meta-ethic commits one to the assertion that God's will is the cause of an action's goodness, then she should remember that the causality in question is not to be construed in terms of an efficient cause but rather of a formal cause. Commenting on this point, Merold Westphal notes "One can easily see why we should distinguish a thing's X-ness from what makes it X when it is a question of efficient cause. But in the case of a thing's rightness and what makes it right it is a question of formal cause or essence and it is not so easy in such a case to see how one could distinguish a thing's X-ness from what makes it X, much less why one ought to do so." "Theism and the Problems of Ethics," *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968) 178-179

morally good. It is this dual movement (so characteristic of the religious life) from what is recognized as morally right to God's will and from God's will to what is morally right that, at least for the believer, seems to imply a theistic meta-ethic.

Of course nothing of what I have said demonstrates that the theistic meta-ethic is in fact true. My aim, however, has not been to establish that it is true but that the usual dismissal of it as unworthy of serious attention is mistaken. I have attempted to demonstrate that the customary reasons given for its rejection imply not only that it is nonsense to think that the goodness of an action could conceivably be identical with God's will but that it is nonsense to think that the evening star could conceivably be identical with the morning star, or that mental states could conceivably be identical with brain states, or that water could be identical with H_2O . There exist no a priori disproofs of identity claims such as these, and any refutation must be accomplished by demonstrating the inadequacy of the large-scale theory in which a particular claim is embedded, since its plausibility is derived from that theory. This means that the critic has no right to dismiss the theistic meta-ethic prior to demonstrating that theism is implausible. Until this has been shown, there is no reason to suppose it is inferior to secular meta-ethics. Indeed to those of us who are theists it seems manifestly superior, capable of resolving the perennial and endemic difficulties that plague nontheological accounts of morality.