

Notes on Theocentric Metaethics

I. The Divine Command Theory

When most people think of using God to account for moral truth, the divine command theory usually comes to mind. Moreover, this theory is often seen as having been decided refuted by Plato, in his dialogue *Euthyphro*. So let's begin there.

(Note that this dialogue concerns the many gods of the Greek pantheon, rather than the single God of theism, and defines holiness (or right action) as that which the gods *love*, rather than what they *command*, but the same form of argument can be applied exactly to the divine command theory.)

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates challenges Euthyphro to give a definition of piety. Euthyphro's best answer is straightforward enough:

(P) *Piety is that which all the gods love.*

Socrates then attacks Euthyphro's position by asking him an unusual question, which forces him to choose between the following options:

- (1) The gods love a pious action *because* it is pious.
- (2) A pious action is pious *because* the gods love it.

Euthyphro picks (1), which Socrates shows is inconsistent with (P), Euthyphro's own theory of holiness. For (P) says that being pious is by definition the same as being god-loved. But in that case we can replace 'pious' with 'god-loved' in (1), to get:

(1') The gods love a pious action *because* it is god-loved.

And (1'), as Socrates points out, is ass-backwards. More precisely, it gets cause and effect mixed up. Something is god-loved because the gods love it, not the other way round. Thus (1) is inconsistent with (P).

Socrates clarifies his point by saying that being god-loved is apparently a mere *attribute* of piety, and not the essential, defining characteristic of it. A mere attribute of a kind is a property of that it might well have lacked, while remaining the same kind. For example, it's a mere attribute of water that it's the stuff that the oceans are made of. The defining characteristic of water is that it has the molecular structure H-O-H.

Has Socrates thereby refuted Euthyphro's account of piety? One may worry that the proof relies of a mere blunder on Euthyphro's part, in selecting option (1) rather than (2), since (2) is pretty much the same as Euthyphro's original theory (P). So let us see how Socrates lures Euthyphro into asserting (1). Socrates asks Euthyphro *why* the gods love a particular pious action, such as an act of generosity. What causes them to do it? Euthyphro accepts the answer that they love the action because it is pious, and thus asserts (1).

The question that faces us is this: What *else* could Euthyphro (or we) give as the reason why the gods love (or God commands) a particular pious act? For example, why does God command honesty and generosity rather than deception and greed? Surely it is not merely a whim, or the result of a coin flip. We can accept that some things result from God's free will, like the number of planets in the solar system, or the colour of the sky, but the wrongness of cruelty seems to be a 'boundary stone set in an

eternal foundation' – as Frege described the laws of logic. The divine command theory (at least as stated by Euthyphro) fails therefore to give an adequate theory of what our moral obligations are grounded upon.

II. Appeal to the Divine *Nature*

The divine command theory is an example of a *theocentric* theory in metaethics, i.e. one that makes God the grounding of moral truth. It is ironic that Plato uses an argument of this form against theocentric metaethics, since the advocates of theocentric ethics use exactly the same type of argument against their naturalistic rivals! Consider for example the theory that moral norms are created by social expectations, or 'social commands', of some kind. Theists object to this by pointing out, for example, that freeing slaves is morally right, even if society condemns it. Social approval is (at best) an attribute of right action, not its defining characteristic. Human societies are much too fickle and capricious to provide a foundation for moral truth.

In comparison to human societies with their varying mores, God seems a much more solid foundation for ethics. God is not only eternal and unchanging, but exists necessarily! Moreover God has many attributes, such as being loving and generous, by necessity as well. It is only God's *will* that is contingent. We should therefore investigate whether theists can provide a more adequate metaethical theory by appealing also to God's *nature*.

God, according to theists, has a certain fixed nature, that includes a character, or *personality* we might say. While God is not exactly a "nice guy", as presented in the Hebrew Torah for example (he gets angry and does a lot of killing) he is presented as loving (to the point of obsession), truthful, a keeper of promises, generous, and so on. These attributes are considered to be 'fixed', not just in the sense of not changing with time, but also in the sense that they could not have been otherwise.

A theist can therefore regard the character of God as providing a template or standard for moral goodness. This pattern is independent of God's will, but not independent of God altogether. Note that Christians used to describe a good person as 'godly', i.e. God-like in his or her character. Also, one of the central Christian doctrines is that humans are made 'in the image of God', which means that human nature is in certain respects modelled on the divine nature.

Thus a simple example of a theocentric metaethical theory is as follows:

(TM1) A character trait is *morally good* iff it conforms to the character of God.

Bill Alston (1990, p. 319) suggests a theory of goodness along these lines.

... we can think of God Himself, the individual being, as the supreme standard of goodness. God plays the role in evaluation that is more usually assigned, by objectivists about value, to Platonic Ideas or principles. Lovingness *is* good (a good-making feature, that on which goodness supervenes) not because of the Platonic existence of a general principle, but because God, the supreme standard of goodness, *is* loving.

Note that this theory (so far) makes no appeal at all to God's *will*, or commands, and so is not vulnerable to the Euthyphro objection. There are other problems with it, however.

One problem is that there seem to be human attributes that fall within the moral sphere, and yet cannot (due their creaturely nature) either conform to God's nature or fail to do so. It is good to have babies, for example, and bad to be a glutton. Since God has neither a uterus nor a stomach, moral status of such actions or attributes must have a different source.

A second problem is that the theory only addresses moral goodness, and says nothing about moral *obligation*. In moral philosophy there is a well-accepted distinction between actions that are *good*, and those that are morally *right*, or *obligatory*. For example, it is considered good and praiseworthy to serve on the PAC of your kid's school, or volunteer with a local charity. But such actions are not obligatory, as you might not have time (e.g. you are doing other, equally good, actions instead). On the other hand, it is obligatory to provide lunch for your kid, pay your taxes, etc. If you don't do these things, someone will come after you. Saying "I don't have time," or "I'm busy saving the Brazilian rainforest" won't cut it. The theory (TM1) doesn't give us any moral obligations, so it's incomplete at best.

To address these problems with (TM1), let's try a hybrid theory: one that makes use of both the nature *and* commands of God.

(TM2) God's character is the fundamental standard for moral goodness, but our moral obligations are generated by God's commands.

This seems better than either the simple divine command theory (DCT) or TM1. The advantage over DCT is that God's commands are no longer arbitrary. Alston (1990, p. 317) states this as follows:

So far from being arbitrary, God's commands to us are an expression of His perfect goodness. Since He is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best.

For example, just as it is impossible for God to lie (according to Hebrews 6:18), since lying is contrary to his nature, it is impossible for God to command us to lie, or to be greedy, cruel or hateful.

TM2 seems a lot better than the simple DCT, but still faces one difficulty. Among all the attributes and actions for are good for

humans only (i.e. good attributes and actions that don't apply to God) there are some that don't seem to be obligatory. For example, getting married and having babies is good, but not obligatory, according to most theistic traditions. Some people, it is claimed, are called to celibacy. But if marriage is neither commanded by God, nor part of the divine nature, then in what sense is it good?

The obvious answer is that God *designed* humans for marriage, so that marriage is in conformity with human nature, i.e. with God's *design plan* for humans.

It is interesting to consider here the various reproductive arrangements that are found throughout the animal kingdom. A few species are monogamous like humans, but it isn't common. For example, while birds typically have one mate for life, the females of many bird species also have a lot of "extra-marital affairs". Many mammal species are polygynous, in that each male has a 'harem' of females that it mates with. Among fish, many species are 'broadcast spawners' who release their sperm and eggs into the water for external fertilisation. The males and females don't even copulate. These various arrangements are no doubt all good, but they can't all be in conformity with God's nature. Instead, their goodness perhaps lies in their being in conformity with God's design plan for that particular species.

The same account will apply to the goodness of a healthy human body. This doesn't seem like moral goodness though. (It's bad to have high blood pressure, but is it *immoral*?) What account can be given of these different kinds of goodness? One theory is that moral goodness applies to states and actions that have at least some rough correspondence to the divine nature. Since humans are described in Genesis as being made in God's image, many parts of human nature are modelled on God, and conformity to the human design plan in these respects will therefore have a somewhat moral flavour. However, other parts of human nature, such as being bipedal, or having a certain blood pressure, are not modelled on God, and so goodness in these respects is non-moral.

Theocentric morality might be argued for as follows:

1. The theistic perspective accounts for the impartiality of morality, as Mark Murphy explains (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Theological Voluntarism”, Section 2.1.)

Consider next the *impartiality* of morals. The domain of the moral, unlike the domain of value generally, is governed by the requirements of impartiality. To use Sidgwick’s phrase, the point of view of morality is not one’s personal point of view but rather “the point of view ... of the Universe” (Sidgwick 1907, p. 382). But, to remark on the perfectly obvious, the Universe does not have a point of view. Various writers have employed fictions to try to provide some sense to this idea: Smith’s impartial and benevolent spectator, Firth’s ideal observer, and Rawls’ contractors who see the world *sub specie aeternitatis* come to mind most immediately (Smith 1759, Pt III, Ch 8; Firth 1958; and Rawls 1971, p. 587). But theological voluntarism can provide a straightforward understanding of the impartiality of morals by appealing to the claim that the demands of morality arise from the demands of someone who in fact has an impartial and supremely deep love for all of the beings that are morality’s proper objects.

Murphy is talking in particular about theological *voluntarism*, the claim that morality derives from God’s *will*, but the point seems to apply more broadly, to theistic accounts of morality in general.

2. Theism seems much better equipped than naturalism at accounting for the *authority* of morality, i.e. its *normative* aspect. In brief, naturalists have to find something within nature to take over the work that is being done by God in theocentric ethics.

Generally speaking, the role of God as creator is handled by our evolutionary history, so instead of a design plan for humans we

have traits that were *selected for* during our evolutionary history. Even from a naturalistic perspective, there is a certain way that humans are ‘supposed to’ function, in the sense that such functions enhanced the fitness of our ancestors. Now, anthropologists like Christopher Boehm (see iweb Readings) say that over the past 100,000 years humans have evolved to *cooperate* with each other, in small tribes, in order to succeed at endeavors that require teamwork (e.g. big game hunting). Those who didn’t cooperate were killed, or at least cast out of the tribe, which was virtually the same thing. Thus evolution shaped our minds to include such traits as altruism and self control.

Evolution is not the only natural force that shaped our minds, however, for we are also strongly shaped by the culture we grew up in. From a naturalistic perspective we have two ‘creators’: evolution and culture. In fact, since we evolved to be social cooperators, evolution has primed us to be formed by social expectations. We find it very painful and difficult to defy our community’s expectations of us, and endure their scorn. Also, beyond the suffering caused by being shunned and stared at, we expect in our bones that angering other people will lead to acts of violence against us (even if this rarely happens in our own society). For these sorts of reasons, naturalist philosopher Michael Ruse says:

“Basically those of us who are nice tend to get more out of life than those of us who are nasty.”

It is important to realise, however, that being ‘nice’ here refers to being a team player, and conforming with our tribe’s mores. Thus a ‘nice’ person, depending on the culture, might punish runaway slaves, or be homophobic. The moral norms that evolution and culture instill in people may not be the ones that we think are correct. For example, in many mammal species, a ‘stepfather’ will kill the young offspring of his new ‘wives’, in order to clear the way for them to bear his own progeny. (Even among humans, stepfathers are statistically dangerous, relatively speaking, for the children.) This trait is apparently adaptive, and so is ‘normal’,

from an evolutionary viewpoint. Does that mean that it's morally permissible? That would be a bitter pill for naturalists to swallow. Some scientists have made (controversial) claims that certain behaviours like rape and homophobia enhanced the fitness of our ancestors. The usual response to such studies is that, even if they are scientifically correct, such facts have no normative implications for *us*.

Also, as Ruse points out, this naturalistic account of morality tries to explain merely why we have moral *psychology* (beliefs, attitudes and emotions) – it doesn't recognise any realm of moral *truth* beyond these. In general, when we have beliefs that don't correspond to any reality, we call them *illusions*. As Ruse (pp. 431-2) says:

“... if we did not think that morality was objective, before long it would break down as we began cheating. If rape isn't really wrong, then why stay back when others move forward? So the entirely natural case is that morality—the objectivity of morality that is—is an illusion put in place by our biology to make us social animals, because social animals are selected over non-social animals.”

Also, since our society today is significantly different from that of our hunter-gatherer ancestors (ours is much larger, and more anonymous) we can get away with non-cooperation in ways that they couldn't. We may, due to our evolved psychology, feel reluctant to be antisocial, and feel guilt or shame afterwards, but such feelings can be dulled by a variety of methods (repetition, alcohol, etc.) and the rewards of harming others can be significant. In other words, not only is morality on a naturalistic account a mere illusion, it is also one that we can learn to dispel. (Keep this to yourself though. If too many people find out, then society will break down!)

According to theism, on the other hand, there are objective moral facts (concerning God's character) that are distinct from our moral beliefs and attitudes, so morality is not an illusion. God's authority over his creation (including us) is intrinsic. As its maker, God

simply has that authority, as an objective fact. The authority of morality, on a theistic view, is essentially the same as the authority of truth and rationality, as we'll see in the next section.

3. Theism allows a unified theory of normativity, covering epistemic and logical norms as well as moral norms.

When looking at the ontological argument, and the notion of a necessary being, we encountered the idea that the laws of logic are defined by the divine intellect, so that rational thinking is essentially thinking that conforms to God's nature. The authority of moral and logical norms is exactly the same, in other words. The theistic universe is fundamentally both rational and good, since its foundation is the perfect rational being.

It is commonly assumed by philosophers that the laws of mathematics and logic have nothing to do with God. After all, they are as they are as a matter of necessity, so that they cannot derive from God's *will*. God is bound by them just as much as we are. On the other hand, naturalists face profound difficulties in accounting for mathematics and logic. What, for example, are the truths of mathematics *about*? Naturalists are loth to believe in a Platonic, abstract realm where “the numbers” exist as independently real entities. Thus, the usual approach is to reduce mathematical truths to some other kind. One popular project in the twentieth century was to show that mathematical truths are ultimately truths of logic. (While this project has fallen from favour, I myself still see some promise in it.) Even if this project were to succeed, however, it would merely shift the problem. For logical truths are equally perplexing from a naturalist's point of view. Indeed, since thinking minds are rather peripheral in the naturalistic universe, a naturalist cannot easily see logic as both (a) objective and (b) concerned with rational thought. Naturalists therefore tend either to relativize logical truth, or to sever its connection with thought.

4. The problem of how we *know* what is right and good is fairly easily answered within theism. Since God designed our brains, he would no doubt make correct moral reasoning natural for us. God gives us “moral intuition”, i.e. the cognitive ability to reason morally. Note that, on this view, theists need be no better at moral reasoning than naturalists are, because they are all using the same natural faculties. Also, one can form judgements about what is good, using our natural faculties, without even *knowing* what the essence of goodness is. As Alston explains,

The particularist is free to recognize that God has so constructed us and our environment that we are led to form sound value judgments under various circumstances without tracing them back to the ultimate standard. Analogously, we are so constructed and so situated as to be able to form true and useful opinions about water without getting so far as to discern its ultimate chemical or physical constitution, without knowing what makes it water.

5. Theocentric morality incorporates what is correct in both deontological and virtue ethics. According to virtue ethics, the deepest moral truths concern character, being a certain type of person, rather than actions as such. A person’s *motives* in performing an action are more important, from a moral perspective, than the consequences of the action. A person who does all the right things, but without love, is seen as morally deficient. Consider, for example, some advice given in the book of Proverbs (23: 6-8):

Do not eat the food of a begrudging host,
do not crave his delicacies;
for he is the kind of person
who is always thinking about the cost.
“Eat and drink,” he says to you,
but his heart is not with you.
You will vomit up the little you have eaten
and will have wasted your compliments.

This host is morally deficient, despite fulfilling his outward duties as a host. Theistic morality agrees with this, saying that the good person is, essentially, God-like in certain respects, and God is loving and generous, not merely acting from a sense of duty. Virtue ethics is often criticized for not giving us rules and duties, so that it is unclear what constitutes moral *action*. Theocentric ethics doesn’t have this problem, as it includes obligations generated by divine commands.

6. In theism, there is a final harmony between goodness and happiness. Mavrodes argues that there is something queer about a morality which ultimately does irreparable harm to some of those who follow its dictates. Nevertheless, we see the good suffer and the wicked prosper. (In Plato’s *Republic*, one character describes the fate of a virtuous man: ‘... at last, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be impaled’.) Theism, however, involves a final judgement that corrects such imbalances.

Consider, for example, Kai Nielsen’s case of a happy tyrant, i.e. an egoist who is powerful enough to escape retribution for his acts of injustice. He is surrounded by a loving family and circle of friends who don’t know, or don’t care, about the harms he is inflicting on people outside his fortified gates. If a naturalistic moralist somehow gets an opportunity to talk to him, is there anything he can say to make the man mend his ways? Apparently not. A theocentric moralist, on the other hand, can make the following points:

- (i) You are not flourishing. (You’re violating your human nature, and your character is at odds with the universe’s foundation. You reject God’s legitimate authority over you. You’d be much better off acting justly.)
- (ii) God will punish you (on Judgement Day, if not in this life).

III. Objections to Theocentric Morality

I have argued that while the *Euthyphro* problem is decisive against a “pure” divine command theory, it has little relevance to theocentric moral theories in general. In particular, theories that appeal to God’s *nature* as a source of moral truth don’t face this difficulty. However, this doesn’t mean that theocentric ethics is unproblematic. Here are some of the criticisms.

1. The statement “God is good” is empty or redundant, meaning (in effect) that God is the way God is. Yet theists love to utter this claim, treating it as having central importance.
2. Normativity is fundamentally just as mysterious for theists as it is for naturalists. Why, for example, should I pay any attention to what God commands, or to his design plan for humans, or to his nature? Of course, there is his threat of violence against me if I do not, but that merely establishes that he is an effective tyrant. Theists will argue that God is not a mere tyrant, for he has (not mere power but) *authority* over us. He commands us legitimately, and we are right to obey him. But *who says* that he has such authority? (Don’t say that God does!) What does it even *mean* to say that he has this authority? (Don’t say that he has the right to command us!) Theists cannot answer these questions in a satisfactory way. In the end, a theist faces a simple choice of whether or not to align himself with God.

In other words, the theists’ argument (2) above is rejected. The ‘intrinsic authority’ of God over his creatures is nothing more than God’s *belief* that he can order us around. But others, such as Joseph Stalin, have held similar views.

IV. Responses to the Objections

1. We must always be careful when claims are made about meaning, since meaning is such a tricky notion. Consider, for

example, the (true) claim that hydrogen is a component of water. This was an important discovery, by Antoine Lavoisier primarily, in the 18th century. Now consider the *analysis* of water (i.e. the claim about what water is, or what it is that makes something water) that water is H₂O. On this analysis, the claim that hydrogen is a component of water is the empty claim that hydrogen is a component of H₂O (the ‘H’ stands for hydrogen). Should we object to the “water = H₂O” analysis on these grounds? Surely not.

One general feature of correct analyses is that the analysans *isn’t synonymous* with the analysandum. For example, water isn’t synonymous with H₂O in the sense that a person might know that H₂O contains hydrogen without knowing that water does. Water and H₂O are the same *stuff*, but they’re not the same *concept*. In a similar way, even those who accept the analysis that goodness is godliness aren’t committed to the view that these terms are synonymous. But in that case “God is good” can be informative, in the same way that “water contains hydrogen” is informative.

Putting the point another way, water presents itself to us under many guises (modes of presentation). It presents itself to us as wet, clear, runny stuff, and also as a chemical compound with certain atomic components. To say that the *same* stuff is presented in these two ways is an informative claim. According to theism, God also presents himself to us in many guises. In particular, we often encounter goodness in the world (say a stranger helps us when we are in need, without any thought of personal gain). From such experiences, and perhaps from an *a priori* idea, we develop the concept of goodness in a way that is quite separate from our concept of God. It’s therefore informative, and not empty, to learn that the essential characteristic of goodness is actually godliness.

2. A theist is bound to admit, I think, that there is no God-independent reason to obey God, or seek to imitate him. Any reason offered, such as “it’s the morally right thing to do”, or “it’s the rational thing to do”, will turn out either to mean that (i) it’s a godly thing to do, or (ii) God commands me to do it. Theists have

long acknowledged, moreover, that one can believe in God without obeying God, since the Devil is such a rebellious believer. Even a well-informed theist can choose to oppose God. So the objection is correct, at least up to a point.

Does it follow that the theist is ultimately no better off than the naturalist in giving an account of normativity, however? This is a comparative claim, so we should compare God's commands with the naturalist's competing sources of normativity, namely our evolutionary history and social commands. There are some similarities here, as follows:

(i) For theists, God is our creator, and for naturalists we are similarly products of evolution and culture. Evolution and society have shaped our thoughts, and made us who we are.

(ii) For theists God has designed our brains to treat his commands as authoritative, having force. For naturalists, evolution has designed us to follow the herd, so that we cannot bear to disobey social commands. (At least in most societies. Our own culture gives us a mixed message, as it also tells us to be independent, question everything, and reject all claims to authority!)

There are also differences between God and evolution/culture as sources of normativity, however. The main one is that God is *necessary and unchanging*. With epistemic norms especially, but also with moral norms (recall the question of moral progress) we regard norms as unchanging and necessary. We do not think that, had evolution gone differently, the laws of logic would have been different. We do not think that moral truth changes with time, as culture does. Also, society is just a bunch of people like us, whereas God is something far bigger than us. He is the foundation of the whole universe, whereas we are just overdeveloped primates living on one small planet in the vastness of space.

On the last point, consider Einstein's question to the ticket collector at Paddington station, "Does Oxford stop at this train?" His point is that we can take the train, rather than the earth, as the

frame of reference relative to which we measure motion. (In a (somewhat) similar way, a theist can choose to take either God or a human society as his moral frame of reference.) But choosing the earth is more natural, since the earth is so much *bigger*, and (hence) less movable (liable to acceleration). Of course, when one enlarges one's view to the whole solar system, then the Sun becomes the natural frame of reference. (We say that the Earth goes around the Sun, not vice versa.) Shifting to the galactic frame, even the Sun moves. And looking at the universe as a whole, the galaxies themselves are drifting apart. Finally, however, when we consider the universe as a whole, there seems to be no meaning to the claim that it moves. What does it move relative to? While the centre of mass of the universe *does* move relative to the earth, and relative to an individual human, to mention such facts seems like a joke. In a (somewhat) similar way, for the theist the question of why God is authoritative is a rather odd one. God is the biggest object, the ultimate frame of reference, relative to which all things are judged. Who is there to judge God?

In short, for theists, normativity is eternal, necessary and metaphysically fundamental. For naturalists it is changing, contingent and metaphysically superficial.