

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology

Lecture 19

The Euthyphro Dilemma

Today we want to continue our discussion of the moral argument for God's existence. Last time we looked at the defense of the first premise that if God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. I finished up last time by emphasizing that we have to correctly understand the question. The question is not "Must we believe in God in order to live a good moral life?" No. I think we all know unbelievers, many of them family members perhaps, who live good and decent lives. Similarly, the question is not "Can we recognize objective moral values and duties without believing in God?" Yes, we can. In fact, the Bible teaches this. The Bible teaches that the demands of God's moral law are written on the heart of every human being. Even people who have no special revelation from God at all nevertheless have a kind of instinctual grasp of the moral law and its requirements. So you need not believe in God in order to know your moral duties or recognize them. Again, the question is not "Can we formulate a system of ethics without reference to God?" If the atheist is willing to concede the intrinsic moral value of human beings then he can probably work out an ethical code of conduct with which the Christian or theist will largely agree.

Rather, the question before us is, "If God does not exist, are there objective moral values and duties?" I've argued that in the absence of God there simply isn't any plausible foundation for affirming the existence of objective moral values or duties.

START DISCUSSION

Student: To rephrase that, a rose by any other name is still a rose. If they believe in intrinsic moral values – absolute – then wouldn't that just be a different name for a characteristic of God even though they don't acknowledge that?

Dr. Craig: Insofar as I think that ultimate moral values are founded in God, yes. I think that would be true. They wouldn't recognize their source but they would recognize that, for example, love is a virtue and hatred is a vice. In that sense they grasp something of the nature of God – that God is love.

Student: Correct me if I am mistaken but if there is no God, how can there be any objective? Everything then becomes subjective, does it not?

Dr. Craig: I am not claiming that. I think that would need to be argued. For example, is there objective truth if there is no God? It would seem to me, at least at face value, that if God did not exist but the universe still existed there would be objective truths. For example, it would be true that God does not exist. It would be true that you exist. That wouldn't be in any way subjective or relative or person-dependent. It seems to me there

would still be objective truth. But when it comes to things like moral values, there it does seem to me that everything would be subjective. That might also be the case with regard to aesthetic values – the beautiful versus the ugly. In the absence of God are there objective aesthetic values or is beauty, as they say, merely in the eye of the beholder? I'd be very open to a kind of theistic argument based upon the objectivity of aesthetic values. But I am not running that argument at this point. We are concentrating simply on moral values and duties.

Student: My problem comes with the fact that the universe is not comprised simply of mankind. There are also huge vast numbers of animals who, if there are objective morals, why don't they have them? They don't. They do what they have to to survive.

Dr. Craig: I think that's right. Animals aren't moral agents. As I said, if God does not exist then we are just a relatively advanced primate species on this little planet somewhat higher than apes. It is difficult to see why we would have moral obligations that they don't.¹

Student: Can you extend this from moral duties to epistemic duties as well? Objective epistemic duties? For example, I ought to believe that which is the case regardless of its utility. It seems like without God we are sort of in a similar situation.

Dr. Craig: Insofar as when one talks about duties it does seem to me that you are talking about moral duties – some of your moral duties would be, as you put it, epistemic. I ought to believe that which is true whether it is useful or not or whether it benefits me or not. That might be a moral duty in the realm of knowledge, I think.

Student: Last week I wanted to ask a question about the mechanism for natural law. Let me frame this a particular way. Perhaps a skeptic might say, "I'll accept I was affected either by nature or by nurture." I think you brought up the name of a particular skeptic last week. They may say, as far as nature, maybe they will buy into the Christian doctrine that their nature is corrupted. Then on the nurture side they may say I am a skeptic. I am not being nurtured by the Christian community. I grew up with atheists. I don't know anything about the Bible. So the question might be from a skeptic, how can we explain the mechanism for how people can know natural law?

Dr. Craig: This isn't part of the argument. I don't have any particular view on that. I am totally open to any theories about how we come to know our moral duties: conscience, rational intuition, reflection upon human worth, divine revelation. I am honestly very open to all sorts of moral epistemologies – about how we come to know the content of our moral duties. I am simply not addressing that question in this argument. This is a question about moral ontology; that is to say, are there objective moral values and duties?

¹ 5:07

It is not a question of moral epistemology – how we come to know our moral duties. That confusion is one that one has to constantly fight against in sharing this argument with people because so often the question will slide into questions of moral epistemology – how do we know the good or how do we know my moral duty? There I have no brief to carry.

Student: I agree. I would always start with an ontology argument first. I am thinking about the curious person who is now at the point of trying to understand that – now curiously seeking and not throwing that as a first objection.

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I say, I am open. I really am. I don't have any particular theory of how we come to know our moral duties. I suspect that being created in the image of God we have this innate sense of the intrinsic value of human beings so that we have a deep moral sense that some action that is incompatible with treating another human person as intrinsically valuable and treating them as merely a means to an end would be immoral and would be wrong. I think you could do a great deal of ethics and understanding our moral duties simply by rational reflection on how would you treat other people if they have intrinsic moral worth and are ends in themselves rather than means to some other end. Beyond that, I think that divine revelation does tell us a lot about our moral duties as well. God has given us the Ten Commandments, the moral law. This will also supplement any intuitions that may be instinctive within us. But I am very open to whatever someone might want to suggest there.

Student: In dealing with those who are pure materialists that would deny any spiritual aspects we talk about and would claim universality of these moral concepts, coming from very back in what they would call that human tree, or the tree of life, be far enough back that it was embedded at that point therefore it became universal as the tree grew and spread throughout humanity.² They are unable, of course, at this time to claim that they have evidence as to what gene or what physical thing could have carried this morality through, but that claim seems to be being made. Do you run into that? If so, how would we best refute that, other than the fact that materialism isn't all there is?

Dr. Craig: As I said last week, I want to affirm that on the atheist view. Given naturalism, what we call moral values and duties are just patterns of behavior ingrained into us by biological evolution and social conditioning, just as in a troop of baboons you see self-sacrificial behavior, evidenced in other forms of cooperative behavior, evidence because natural selection has determined it to be advantageous in the struggle for survival. So there has evolved among *Homo sapiens* on this planet a similar herd morality which is advantageous in the struggle for survival. But on atheism there doesn't seem to

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be anything that would make that morality objectively binding and true. If you were to rewind the film of human evolution back to the beginning and start over again, a very different sort of creature might have evolved with a very different set of moral values. In fact, you will remember I quoted from Darwin's book, *The Descent of Man*, where he said if human beings had been raised under the condition that bees are in hives then mothers would think it their duty to kill their daughters and no one would think of protesting. I think that this point is actually one that we can use to say that premise (1) is true. If God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. That sort of thinking supports premise (1).

Student: When you did the debate with Sam Harris about the moral argument, do you feel he kind of weaseled out of saying that there is a source of objective morality simply by saying that he doesn't see how your version of morality – or what you were saying is objective morality – he doesn't see why it has to be the God of Abraham? Isn't that kind of like saying it has to be something, but he doesn't think it is the God of Abraham?

Dr. Craig: Well, it has been many years since that debate, and my memory is dim of it. What I remember is that of the three objections that I presented against his humanism . . . he affirms the objectivity of moral values and duties. He is not like the naturalist or relativist. He wants to affirm the objectivity of moral values and duties, but he grounds them in human beings that whatever is conducive to human flourishing is good, and whatever detracts from human flourishing is bad. I challenged that on a naturalistic view. I couldn't see any reason to think that that would be the case on naturalism. As I remember, he didn't even address the three criticisms that I gave. I don't recall whether he offered some critique of theistic-based ethics. You'd have to look at the debate again.³ It is on YouTube. Maybe he gave the Euthyphro Argument that we are going to talk about in a minute. I just don't recall. But what I do remember is that he didn't even try to muster a defense of his view that on naturalism objective moral values and duties would exist.

Student: To me it looked like he sort of just by-stepped what you said. He claimed you misquoted him from his book and suggested the audience read it. Then he just said he didn't understand why you took from the position of objective morality coming from God (or a god). He said that it doesn't have to be the God of Abraham which obviously wasn't a logical answer. It doesn't fit to the argument. You weren't saying it was the God of Abraham.

Dr. Craig: That is irrelevant because we are defending a generic monotheism, not Christian or Jewish monotheism in that debate. The debate was on, “Is the foundation of

³ For a video of this debate, see <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/craig-vs-harris-notre-dame>
For a transcript of this debate, see <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris> (links accessed February 11, 2016).

morality natural or supernatural?" Which is an argument for God, not for the God of Abraham.

By the way, in terms of the misquoting, I had the footnotes to my speech right there with me lest he might say that. After the debate, I showed him the footnotes where in fact this was an accurate quotation of his own work.

Student: Given the last two questions and the last session, I am still not convinced that objective morality isn't subjective morality.⁴ I am not sure that it is binary. I am not sure that all morality isn't subjective. From last session (and I roped my mom into this – we did review the tape), not to bring back the ugliest of all analogies but the Nazism analogy was the one that said that is the evidence that you use for the existence of objective morality or did I misunderstand?

Dr. Craig: Not really. I haven't defended yet the second premise that says objective moral values and duties do exist. All I've defended is the first premise which says that if God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. The Holocaust illustration was not an illustration, or meant to prove, that moral values and duties are objective. It was to illustrate what one means by objective versus subjective. What I said was to say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the people who carried it out thought that it was right, and that it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and brainwashed or exterminated everybody who disagreed with them so that it was universally agreed among mankind that the Holocaust was good. To say that it was objectively wrong is to say that it would still be wrong even if it were universally agreed among human beings that it was OK. That was all that illustration was meant to show – the difference between objective versus subjective. Do you want to follow up?

Student: No, I want to get out of the way and go to the next point. *[laughter]*

Dr. Craig: OK! Good!

END DISCUSSION

The question still remains: was the Holocaust objectively wrong? We haven't talked about that yet. But before we come to that, we need to consider objections to premise (1). I've given a defense of it, but there are clearly objections to it.

The first objection that will be brought up if you present this argument will be the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma. The Euthyphro Dilemma is really an objection to premise (1). The name comes from a character in one of Plato's dialogues named Euthyphro. The dilemma basically goes like this: is something good just because God wills it, or does God will something because it is good? If you say that something is good just because

God wills it then what is good and evil becomes arbitrary. God could have willed that hatred is good. Then we would be morally obligated to hate one another and seek to do one another harm. That seems crazy. Some moral values, at least, seem to be necessarily the case and not just arbitrary in that way. But if you say that God wills something because it really is good and because it is good that is why he wills it, then The Good is independent of God contrary to premise (1). In that case objective moral values and duties exist independently of God, and it is not the case that if God were not to exist objective moral values do not exist. So this is the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma.

We don't need to refute either horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma because the dilemma that it presents is a false dilemma. It is not a true dilemma. It is a false dilemma. Namely, there is a third alternative that God wills something because *he* is good. What do I mean by that? I mean that God's own concrete nature is the standard of goodness, and his commandments to us are in turn expressions of his nature. In short, our moral duties are constituted by the commands of a holy and loving God.

So moral values are not independent of God because God's own character determines what is good.⁵ God is essentially compassionate, kind, impartial, fair, and so forth. His nature is the moral standard which determines good and bad. Just as a high-fidelity recording is measured by how closely it approximates to the sound of a live performance (that is what we mean by "high fidelity") so moral actions are measured by how closely they approximate to God's own nature. God's commands, in turn, reflect his moral character. Therefore, they are not arbitrary.

So if the atheist asks, "If God were to command child abuse, would we then be obligated to abuse our children?" he is asking a question like, "If there were a square circle, would its area be the square of one of its sides?" The question has no answer because what it is predicated on is logically impossible. The Euthyphro Dilemma presents us with a false choice and we shouldn't be tricked by it. You don't have to choose either horn. There is a third alternative, namely, the morally good or bad is determined by God's nature and the morally right or wrong is determined by his will. Moral values are rooted in his nature; moral duties are determined by his will. God wills something because he is good. Something is right because God wills it.

This view of moral theory has been defended eloquently in our day by such prominent philosophers as Robert Adams, William Alston, Philip Quinn, and many others. Yet atheists continue to attack the straw man erected by the Euthyphro Dilemma. For example, in the *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* published in 2007 the article on God and morality, which is written by a very prominent ethicist, refers neither to the work of these men nor to the alternative that I've just laid out, but it attacks only the view that

⁵ 20:08

God arbitrarily made up moral values which is a view that I am not acquainted with being defended by anyone today. No one I am acquainted with defends that view.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Could you please repeat the first alternative?

Dr. Craig: Something is good just because God wills it. That is the first alternative. In other words, moral values are rooted in the will of God. The other one is that God wills something because it is good. It is good in and of itself, and God being a good person wills it. So God wills something because it is good.

You don't need to refute them because it is a false dilemma. If this were a true dilemma, it would have the form "A or not-A." Then you are stuck. In a true dilemma where the alternatives are logical contradictories there is no middle ground. Then you've got to refute one of the alternatives. Right? But that is not the form of the Euthyphro Dilemma. The form of the Euthyphro Dilemma is "A or B" because those aren't contradictories, those two alternatives. They are A or B. With a false dilemma, you escape it by executing a move known by the logician and the matador alike as going between the horns of the dilemma or escaping the horns of the dilemma. You suggest some third alternative C. There is no need to refute the two horns of the dilemma. They are wrong those two views, I believe. They are false. But the correct one is the third view, C. And that is: God wills something because he is good.⁶ God's own concrete nature is the standard of goodness, and his commandments then (which constitute our duties) flow out of that moral nature.

Student: In C. S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*, when he offers his moral argument for God, he uses an example of trying to explain how God is The Good by saying if you have two artists and you ask them to paint a picture of New York City, he says the only way you can judge which one is actually better is if New York City actually exists. There has to be a standard. Do you think that is a good analogy to say how God is the standard of right and wrong?

Dr. Craig: It seems like a good analogy. He is saying there that these two representations are measured in their realism by the actual thing. In the same way, let the artistic representations be moral actions by human beings and let God be New York City, and the goodness or the badness of the actions will be measured by how closely they approximate to God himself. Are they loving? Are they fair? And so forth. That seems to be a good analogy.

⁶ 25:00

I also like the analogy I gave of the high-fidelity recording. Something is high fidelity insofar as it approximates the sound of a live orchestra. There the moral actions would be like the recordings and the live performance is God.

Student: This commits you to essentialism – that God has essential properties. Right?

Dr. Craig: Yes.

Student: Of course, this would be very difficult in a unitarian-monotheism – that God is one person – to hold that God is essentially good. Because there is some possible state of affairs where God exists without anything else and so his moral properties are hard to see if they are exemplified.

Dr. Craig: If I understand where you are going with this, I think you are suggesting that, on a unitarian view of God where God is just an isolated person all alone by himself, he wouldn't be able to exemplify certain moral properties like “being loving” unless he just loves himself. A trinitarian view of God has a fellowship of divine persons with an inner-trinitarian love relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So God is essentially loving within his very being with no need of creatures to love in order to be essentially loving. Is that the idea?

Student: Yeah. I have a suspicion that a unitarian-monotheist like a Muslim really couldn't resort to this to get out of the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Dr. Craig: That may well be the case. I think that is one plausibility argument for trinitarianism that I've defended.

Student: I know you said you didn't need to refute the A or the B but just humor me. I wanted to ask a little bit about the voluntarist. God wills something just because God wills it. A lot of the people in the Reformed camp that I talk to – i.e. Calvinists – do actually hold to views like that. Even Gordon Clarke, I know, was an adamant voluntarist.

Dr. Craig: Let me just interrupt to say – did you notice the word he is using here? We want to highlight that word. Voluntarism – that is the view that moral values are rooted simply in the will of God. God just decides that it is good to be loving, but he could have decided that it is good to be hateful. That is the voluntarist view. That is one horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma that I am rejecting. His claim is that certain Reformed theologians seem to favor this voluntarist horn.

Student: Part of the reason why someone like me or you, I think, may reject that is because of this idea that it seems very counter-intuitive to say that God could have made it our moral duty to, say, rape or kill other people. That seems wrong. A lot of times what they respond with is the only reason you have that intuition is because God has arbitrarily willed that you have it. So therefore they seem to think it seems to defeat the problem.

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I do think that is a powerful response. In other words, what they can say is of course you think that hatred is wrong because it is wrong! God has decided that it is wrong. So of course you have the moral intuition that it is wrong. What else would you expect? God has decided that it is wrong and you have this instinctual grasp of the moral law. So that doesn't refute the view that God just sort of made up these moral values.⁷ I think that is a very powerful rejoinder.

But here is how I put the objection. It seems not simply that these things are wrong, but that they are necessarily wrong. That there is no possible world in which it would be good to be consistently hateful and to abuse children and so forth. That, I think, is not so easily dismissed because there we are talking about a modal intuition that isn't grounded in God's will. Right? Because he just decided in this world that it is wrong, but given that moral values seem to be necessary they hold in all possible worlds and therefore couldn't be (it seems to me) simply the result of his will. That would be how I would respond to that attempted defense of voluntarism.

Student: You can have an attribute without necessarily needing to express it if you wanted to take a non-trinitarian point of view. You could have the capacity for love and be stranded on a desert island and not have the ability to express it. But that doesn't mean that it is not there.

Dr. Craig: What you are saying is that something like being loving could be a dispositional property that the unitarian God has; namely, if other persons were to exist then he would love them, just as saying a good-natured person marooned on a desert island would have a disposition to be loving to others even if there isn't anybody there on the island to love. I feel the analogy. I hear it. But it seems to me that we want to say more than that about God. Not simply that God has a disposition to love people if they did exist, but that he actually is loving. His character is such that he gives himself away in love to another person. I think that that demand is better met on a trinitarian view of God than on a unitarian view of God. On the unitarian view of God, God existing along isn't an actively loving person. He would just at best have a disposition. I think that is not fully adequate to the greatest conceivable being.

Student: I would agree. I was just trying to answer for the Unitarian.

Dr. Craig: You were defending the Unitarian!

Student: No, no. I was trying to answer . . . somebody asked how he can have the property of loving if he is a unity. He could have that attribute and still not be able to express it. But I would, of course, accept the trinitarian concept that his goodness is inherent in his being.

Dr. Craig: All right.

END DISCUSSION

What we will do next time is look at another objection to premise (1) – another attempt to have objective moral values and duties apart from God.⁸